

“Sufis, Sea Monsters, and Miraculous Circumcisions: Comparative Conversion Narratives and Popular Memories of Islamization”

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DRAFT

Kazakhstan, the Maldives, Indonesia. Though the last of these boasts the largest Muslim population in the world, all three are often presented as somehow peripheral to or only loosely associated with the larger Islamic world. These are places, according to popular representations, where true Islam never took root, but where traditional superstitions and belief structures seep through and localize Islamic practice to the point that it bears little resemblance to the “pure” Islam found in the Arab heartlands of the Middle East and North Africa. Unfortunately, this narrative, though pervasive, stems from incorrect and narrow assumptions about the nature of Islam, the meaning of conversion, and the process of Islamization. This chapter will explore conversion myths from the Golden Horde, the Maldives, and Malacca, to show how popular understandings of Islamization were shaped by and deeply rooted in Islamic cosmologies and worldviews.

Conversion narratives represent an interesting and challenging kind of source, in that they do not seek to tell us what actually happened, but what a community says happened. This framing is significant because the narrative itself is more concerned with affirming a sense of shared identity – serving as a form of origin story – than with providing historically accurate accounts.¹ To discount these myths based on whether or not they are historically plausible is to

¹ For a thorough discussion of this, see Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

miss the point entirely. Instead, we will explore the ways in which these stories served a legitimizing function and reflected an unquestionably Islamic understanding of the world. At first glance, the performance of miraculous feats by mysterious travelers – be it surviving hours in a hot oven, fending off a virgin-stealing demon from the sea, or fulfilling an auspicious dream – may appear strikingly un-Islamic in character. However, by digging beneath the surface of these stories we reveal a sophisticated engagement with Islamic motifs and eschatology. By recounting miraculous events that accompanied conversion, these myths provide supernatural sanctions for the adoption of Islam, the need for which reflected ongoing tensions brought about by the incorporation of “a new alien cultural element on the existing order.”² This is not to imply that these stories do not also incorporate local pre-Islamic elements and understandings, they unquestionably do, which helps account for their original and continued cultural relevance. The emphasis on the conversion of the existing ruler, for example, sheds light on the significance of hereditary kingship in each of these societies, something that is much less important within the Islamic tradition.³ However, these aspects of the myths sit alongside and are complementary to an Islamic conception of the world, rather than displaying an ignorance or lack of regard for it.

The Stories

1. “Hairy Papa” and the Oven

Our first story comes from the Golden Horde, a Mongol successor state, which spanned parts of modern-day Russia and Kazakhstan from the thirteenth through the early sixteenth

² Russell Jones, “Ten Conversion Myths from Indonesia” in Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 153.

³ An exception to this is Shia Islam, where the source of legitimacy is limited to descent from Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali. All the locations discussed here adopted Sunni Islam, where religious authority is – at least in theory – based on merit rather than bloodline.

centuries. Though Islam enjoyed a presence in these regions from at least the tenth century – as attested to in the famous travel account of Ibn Fadlan (877-960 C.E.) – the Mongol conquests fundamentally altered the social and political landscape of the region. Coming from a multi-religious environment, the Mongols avoided persecution based on religious faith, a practice which remained in place even as three of the four Mongol successor states⁴ adopted Islam as the state religion. The population of the Golden Horde was primarily Turkic, and the conversion of the Mongol ruler Özbek Khan (r. 1313-1341) represents an important moment in the forging of a new Turko-Mongol culture built around a common religious identity. In the popular imagination, Özbek himself came to represent the primogenitor of the modern Uzbek people, who trace their common identity as a nation to his adoption of Islam. This narrative of Özbek's conversion comes from the sixteenth-century account recorded by Ötemish Hajji in the *Tarikh-i Dust Sultan*.

The cause of Özbek Khan's conversion to Islam was that inspiration came from God most high to four Sufi saints: "Go and summon Özbek to Islam." And by the command of God they came to the door of Özbek Khan and sat outside his royal reserve.

The Khan treated his soothsayers with great respect and honor, always seating them at his side. When these Sufi saints came, the servants said, "What kind of people are you?" The saints said, "Take us into the Khan's presence." The Khan's gaze settled upon them and because God illuminated the Khan's heart with the light of guidance, an attraction and affection appeared in his heart towards them. He asked, "What kind of people are you, and on what business have you come?" They said, "We are Muslims, and we have come by the command of God most high to make you a Muslim."

At this moment, the Khan's soothsayers cried out: "These are bad people; one should kill them rather than speak with them." The Khan said, "Why would I kill them? I am a great king; I have no cause for alarm from any of you. Debate with one another; whoever among you has the religion that is true, I will follow him."

These two parties fell into discussion, experiencing much turmoil and contention. At last they gave him their decision: they would dig two oven-pits and fire up each one with ten cartloads of wood; one of the soothsayers would

⁴ The Ilkhanate in Persia, the Chaghatayid Khanate in Central Asia, and the Golden Horde all adopted Islam. The Yuan Dynasty in China preferred Buddhism.

enter one oven, and one of the Sufi saints would enter the other oven. “Whoever emerges without being burned, his religion will be true,” they resolved.

The next morning, they dug the oven-pits, gathered wood, and heated it up. They assigned one to the soothsayers and the other to the Muslims. The saints were solicitous to one another, saying: “Which of us shall go in?” One of them was called Baba Tükles (“Hairy Papa”), because all his limbs were covered with hair. He said, “Give me permission; let me go in.” The other saints recited the *fatihah* (opening of the Qur’an) on his behalf. Then the Baba said, “Prepare armor for me,” and when they had prepared the armor, he put it on over his bare flesh. Then he began to recite the remembrance of God most high and moved toward the oven. They say that the Baba’s body hair stood straight up and came out through the eyelets of the armor for everyone to see. He walked on and entered the oven. They brought the flesh of a sheep, hung it over the oven to cook, and closed the door.

Now we have come to the story of the soothsayers. The soothsayers took out one from among them by force and threw him into the oven. As soon as he fell in, the ashes of his body turned blue and green and the flames roared out of the oven’s mouth. When all the people, beginning with the Khan, saw this phenomenon, their hearts turned away from the infidel religion and inclined to the Muslim way.

Meanwhile, the voice of the Baba uttering his recitation came uninterruptedly out of the other oven. When it was presumed that the sheep’s flesh was fully cooked, they opened the mouth of the oven; and the Baba, wiping the sweat from his blessed face, came out, saying “What’s the hurry?” They saw that the armor was glowing red hot, but by the power of God most high not a hair of the Baba’s body was burned. When all the people, beginning with the Khan, saw this, they at once grasped hold of the hems of the saints’ garments and became Muslims.⁵

2. *The Virgin-stealing Sea Demon*

This account of the conversion of the Maldives, a chain of islands to the southwest of India, comes from the intrepid and, at times, painfully arrogant medieval Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta (1304-1377).⁶ Islam was introduced to the Maldives by Arab traders in the twelfth century, eventually replacing Buddhism as the dominant religion. Unlike the other two conversion narratives we will discuss, this one is not recorded by an internal source, but by an

⁵ Abridged and adapted by the author from the Chaghatay text and English translation found in DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 541-43.

⁶ Ibn Battuta also visited the court of Özbek Khan in the Golden Horde. While he describes Özbek as a Muslim, he does not provide any details regarding the Khan’s conversion.

outside visitor. It is included here because Ibn Battuta takes pains to identify the Maldivian sources for the story – including their names and professions – thus highlighting the myth’s local origin, development, and resonance. In the Maldives today, Ibn Battuta’s version remains popular and serves as the earliest surviving account of the coming of Islam.

I was informed by reliable persons among the islanders, such as the jurist Isa al-Yamani and the jurist professor Ali and the judge Abdallah and a number of others, that the people of these islands were formerly infidels. Every month, an evil demon from among the jinn would appear from the direction of the sea, looking like a ship filled with lamps. Their custom when they saw it was to take a virgin girl, dress her in finery and place her in a certain *budkhanah*⁷, or idol-house, that was built on the shore, with a window overlooking the sea. There they would leave her for the night. In the morning they would come and find her raped and dead. Thus they went on, drawing lots each month, and he to whom the lot fell would give his daughter over to the demon.

It happened that there came to them a Maghribi⁸ named Abu’l-Barakat al-Barbari, who knew the Holy Qur’an by heart. He lodged in the house of an old woman on the island of Malé. One day he returned to find her female relatives assembled and weeping, as if for a funeral. He asked them what the matter was, but they did not understand him. So an interpreter came and told him that the lot had fallen to the old woman, and that she had only one daughter for the demon to kill. At this, Abu’l-Barakat, who was fresh-faced and beardless, said to the old woman, “I will go in place of your daughter.” So they took him that night and put him in the *budkhanah*. Abu’l-Barakat had performed his ritual ablutions, and now he began to recite the Qur’an. At last, he could make out the demon through the window, but he persisted in his recitation, and when the demon was near enough to hear the words of the Qur’an it plunged under the face of the sea.

When dawn broke, the Maghribi was still reciting. The old woman and her relatives and the people of the island came, for their custom was to remove the dead girl and burn her corpse; but they found the Maghribi still reciting. They took him to their king and told him the story, at which the king was amazed. The Maghribi proposed to the king that he should embrace Islam, and tried to persuade him to do so. At this the king said, “Stay with us another month, and if you can do again what you did last night and save yourself from the demon, I will become a Muslim.”

So the Maghribi stayed on, and it happened that even before the month was out God opened the breast of the king to Islam and he embraced it, he and his womenfolk and children and high officials. Then at the turn of the month the Maghribi was taken back to the *budkhanah*, where he recited till dawn, but the demon did not come. The sultan and the people came and found him reciting

⁷ Likely from the Persian خانه بت (khana-but).

⁸ Other accounts identify him as East African or Persian. As a fellow Maghribi, Ibn Battuta likely felt partial to this version.

there, and they smashed the idols and destroyed the *budkhanah*, and the people of the island embraced Islam. They then sent word to all the other islands, and their people became Muslims as well.

When I arrived in the Maldives, I had no idea about the story. One night, while I was busy with something or other, I heard the people crying out, “There is no god but God!” and “God is most great!” And I saw the children carrying copies of the Qur’an on their heads, and the women banging cauldrons and other vessels of brass. I was astonished and said to them, “What are you doing?” And they said, “Can you not see it, out on the sea?” So I looked and I saw something like a great ship that seemed to be filled with blazing lamps and torches. And they said, “That is the demon. It always appears thus, once a month. But as long as we do what you have seen, it goes away and does us no harm.”⁹

3. *Dreams of Circumcision*

This final story comes from the kingdom of Malacca in modern-day Indonesia, which adopted Islam in the mid-fifteenth century and is recorded in the *Sejarah Malayu (Malay Annals)*, composed sometime during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. It bears a striking resemblance to another conversion myth from Indonesia, that of the Pasai kingdom in Sumatra, which embraced Islam in the late thirteenth century. It should be noted that the spread of Islam to the population at large was, in reality, a slow process, as attested to by the early sixteenth-century Portuguese traveler, Tomé Pires, who estimated that only about ten percent of the total population was Muslim at the time of his visit.

One night the king, Raja Tengah, had a dream. He dreamt that he saw the Prophet Muhammad, who said to him, “Say, ‘I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger.’” And Raja Tengah repeated it word for word, whereupon the Prophet said to him, “Your name is Muhammad. Tomorrow, when it is time for the afternoon prayer, a ship will arrive from Jeddah and a man will disembark. See to it that you do whatever he tells you.” And Raja Tengah answered, “Very well,” whereupon the Prophet disappeared from his sight.

When Raja Tengah awoke from sleep, he saw that he had been circumcised and he kept continually repeating, “I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger,” to the astonishment of everyone in the palace. Concerned, the king’s ministers said, “Is this Raja of ours possessed by the devil or is he mad? We had better inform the Bendahara (chief minister)

⁹ Abridged and adapted by the author from the English translation found in Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Landfalls: On the Edge of Islam from Zanzibar to the Alhambra* (London: John Murray, 2010).

straightaway.” And the Bendahara came to the royal apartments and found the Raja still repeating, “I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger.”

The Bendahara said, “What language is this that you are speaking, sire?” And the Raja recounted his dream. Then, the Bendahara asked, “If your dream was true, sire, what is there to prove it?” And the Raja answered, “The fact that I am circumcised. That proves the truth of my dream.” The Bendahara said that if the ship arrived from Jeddah that day, as foretold in the dream, then the dream was true, and the Raja agreed.

And when it was the hour of *‘asar*, a ship arrived from Jeddah and a Makhdum (honorific title usually applied to a Sufi) named Sayyid ‘Abdul-‘Aziz disembarked and prayed on the shore. All who saw him were astonished at his behavior and said, “What means this bobbing up and down?” There was a general scramble to see him and the people crowded so thickly together that there was no space between them. There was such a disturbance that the noise came to the ears of the Raja inside the palace. Straight away the Raja set forth on his elephant, escorted by his chiefs, and perceived that the Makhdum’s behavior was exactly as in his dream.

When the Makhdum had finished his prayers, the Raja made his elephant kneel and took the Makhdum to the palace. The Bendahara and the chiefs embraced Islam and every citizen, high and low, was commanded to do likewise. As for the Raja himself, he received instruction in the faith from the Makhdum, and took the title of Sultan Muhammad Shah.¹⁰

Analysis and Common Themes

These myths feature several common themes, including the conversion of the ruler, the arrival of a foreign Muslim traveler, the performance of miracles, the invocation of the text of the Qur’an or the *shahada*, the establishment of a dual structure of authority (political and religious), and the widespread adoption of Islam by the masses. This last feature is especially significant from an Islamic perspective. Though a modern or Western reader may dismiss these purported mass conversions as insincere or potentially invalid, there are two identifiably Islamic features at play here. First, it is necessary to point out that Islam is best understood as both a religion and a social project. The emphasis of this project is less on immediate individual salvation and more

¹⁰ Abridged and adapted by the author from the English translation found in Jones, “Ten Conversion Myths from Indonesia,” 136-37.

on the establishment of a just society according to God's will. For example, Islamic law, which is made up of the human interpretation (*fiqh*) of divine law (*sharia*), is primarily concerned with what actions will please God, thus elaborating on our active duties to both God and society. As a result, orthopraxy can be viewed as the minimal first step required in the process of becoming a Muslim. Raja Tengah's circumcision perfectly exemplifies this point. Even before the Raja knows that he has become a Muslim, his new status is written, quite literally, on his body. Thus, though the change appears to be only nominal, it is anything but meaningless. It is the initial outward or external marker of becoming Muslim that matters. Once we live as Muslims through our actions and the observance of rituals, the assumption is that our hearts and minds will follow.¹¹ The second feature stems from the meaning of the word Islam itself: submission. To be a Muslim (one who submits [to God]) is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process and struggle. In this conception of religion, Islamization is not something that can or should occur instantaneously. Instead, the act of opening oneself to becoming a Muslim is the crucial and all-important first step that is referenced in all of the stories above through the mass conversion of the population.

In terms of authority, it is noteworthy that the existing power structures are not replaced but reoriented through the conversion of the rulers. In all three stories, it is specifically stated that the ruler was the first to convert, followed by the rest of the population. Thus, we are not talking about memories of Islamization through conquest or force, but rather through the conversion of rulers whose legitimacy is already firmly established. In this sense, the existing ruler adopts Islam as a new source of legitimacy and tacitly acknowledges a second source of authority alongside himself, represented in the stories by Sufi mystics who have arrived from

¹¹ DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 23-27.

outside bearing religious knowledge and divine sanction. This builds on the idea that Sufis can exercise for local communities an equivalent role to that Muhammad occupies for the universal Muslim community. The mystics prove their ability to intercede between humans and God through the performance of miracles, which are facilitated through the recitation of the Qur'an. Be it Baba Tükles' survival in the oven, Abu'l-Barakat's defeat of the jinn, or Sayyid 'Abdul-'Aziz's fulfillment of a divinely-inspired dream, these mystics serve both as conduits through which God's existence is verified and as spiritual guides through whom religious authority is enacted.¹²

The extent to which Sufi mystics facilitated the historical spread of Islam is subject to ongoing debate. Other considerations, such as trade, political alliances, and marriage appear to have been at least as influential as wandering mystics in introducing Islam to these societies. However, the significance of Sufis in the popular memory of Islamization, regardless of their actual historical role, is displayed clearly through these myths, where the motives for conversion are not as mundane as political or economic gain, but arise instead from a seemingly rational response to witnessing incredible supernatural events. There is no choice but to convert to Islam, given the proof of God's existence provided through these miraculous displays. To deny it, would in fact, be the irrational response. The adoption of a new religious identity means the delegitimizing of one's previous identity, myths, and worldview. This is a radical shift that, in the popular imagination reflected by the mythmakers, needed some kind of immaterial explanation. The continued existence across the Islamic world of shrines dedicated to Sufi saints, especially those credited with founding local Muslim communities, show that this emphasis on genesis through mystical intervention is still prevalent today. While there is no

¹² Devin DeWeese, "Authority," in James J. Elias, ed. *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (London: Oneworld, 2010), 47-52; Jones, "Ten Conversion Myths from Indonesia," 153-56.

official canonization of saints in Islam – reflecting the lack of a formalized religious hierarchy – as *awliya* (Ar. sing.: *wali*), they are believed to hold a special relational status as “friends of God”, who serve as ongoing intermediaries between humans and the divine. In the myths, this is expressed through their ability to channel God’s divine grace, which both sets them apart from charlatans and makes them integral to the fabric of the new community.

Story-Specific Themes

A. The Fire Pit

In addition to the common themes discussed above, each of these stories has unique elements that reflect additional Islamic motifs. In the case of the Golden Horde, the most obvious of these is the fire pit, from which Baba Tükles emerges unscathed. There is a clear connection between the oven and the idea of hellfire as referenced throughout the Qur’an. For example, Sura 5 states: “As for those who reject Faith...they will have a painful punishment. They will want to get out of the Fire but will be unable to do so: theirs will be a lasting punishment.”¹³ Importantly, according to Islamic eschatology, everyone enters hell, yet the righteous will be rescued from it, which helps explain the survival of Baba Tükles. His inability to even feel the fire is reminiscent of another image found throughout the Qur’an: that of the inhabitants or inmates of the Fire. This imagery moves away from the idea of hell as a physical place and emphasizes it instead as a state of being. This allows for the juxtaposed imagery of those who experience the fire (the idolatrous soothsayer) and those who do not (Baba Tükles).

¹³ Qur’an 5:36-37. Wahiduddin Khan, trans.

In the myth, it is Baba Tükles' piety that insulates him against the fire, whereas the pagan soothsayer is instantly consumed by it. This serves to verify both the truth of Islam and the purity of Baba Tükles' faith. Additionally, the narrative invokes motifs found in the Qur'anic story of Ibrahim, who was cast into a fire pit by idolaters, but saved through God's protection. Similar tales of "trials by fire" that evoke the story of Ibrahim are found throughout the Islamic world, especially in Sufi hagiographies, and it is from these traditions that the character of Baba Tükles would have taken shape. While the myth also contains myriad symbols reflecting the syncretic Central Asian context within which it emerged, as mentioned above, these complement rather than contradict an Islamic understanding of the world.¹⁴

Jinn

In Islamic cosmology, God created jinn (genies) from fire, angels from light, and humans from clay. Unlike angels, but similarly to humans, jinn possess free will and therefore have the ability to either help or hurt humankind. The latter is usually accomplished by luring people away from God's path, using manipulative and addictive tools such as gambling or alcohol. Jinn can also possess specific spaces or individuals, which has given rise to a variety of localized practices aimed at exorcising troublesome spirits from their unwitting hosts. In addition to human-like qualities such as free will, intelligence, and emotions, they also have the ability to change forms and perform supernatural feats. Their existence is verified in the Qur'an – Sura 72, specifically, tells the story of jinn who accepted Islam – and in the minds of Muslims, for whom they are not superstitions or mythical creatures, but very real inhabitants of a spiritual plane that overlays, and occasionally interacts with, our own material world.

¹⁴ DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 243-56.

In the story from the Maldives, the jinn's fiery origin is represented in the lamps adorning the demonic ship. However, rather than tempting or possessing the island's inhabitants, this jinni commits monstrous acts of violence against them. Jinn usually adopt the shape of humans or animals (or hybrids, such as mermaids or centaurs), and the abstract form depicted here may represent the incorporation of an earlier, pre-Islamic myth. In Islam, evil jinn can be repelled by holy persons, the names of God, and the words of the Qur'an. It was thus through al-Barbari's recitation and the islanders' monthly invocation of the name of God, that the fiendish jinni was kept at bay. The most interesting part of the story, perhaps, is the moment when the mythic jinni sails into Ibn Battuta's line of vision, continuing to confirm the validity of Islam for the observers and displaying the regular incursion of the spiritual world into the mundane.

Dreaming of Muhammad

In the early thirteenth century, philosopher Ibn Arabi argued that there were three distinct types of dreams: those that reflect our own lived thoughts, feelings, and experiences; those that provide windows into the fundamental truths of reality using abstract imagery; and those that contain clear and direct revelations of divine truth. Ibn Arabi was not the first nor the last Muslim philosopher to explore the significance of dreams, in fact, the science of dream interpretation (Ar.: *tabir*) has a longstanding tradition going back to the earliest Muslim community. According to this tradition, dreams can serve as valuable sources of religious inspiration and as a medium through which God communicates directly with favored humans. In the story from Malacca, the fact that Raja Tengah was chosen to receive a revelatory dream indicates purity of character and reinforces his divine right to kingship. That being said, he was unable to fully comprehend the dream on his own, and the Bendahara's inability to offer a clear

explanation echoes the story of Joseph found in both the Torah and the Qur'an. In that instance, the royal advisors were powerless to understand the Egyptian king's dream, whereas Joseph was immediately able to parse through the metaphors to reveal the true meaning. In both instances, the dreams of the ruler also provide some portent of events that will happen in the future: Joseph is able to predict the upcoming years of famine and of plenty, whereas Raja Tengah is alerted to the arrival of the Makhdum. By fulfilling the dream, it is clear that the Makhdum also holds God's favor and is thus able to serve as a legitimate source of religious authority for the newfound Muslim community.¹⁵

The fact that the Prophet Muhammad appears in the dream is also significant. First, it creates a direct connection with the founder of the Muslim community, who chooses to bring Malacca into the *umma* through Raja Tengah. In some ways this is comparable to Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Both experiences bestow authority and divine sanction by circumventing earthly intermediaries in order to reveal the truth of revelation to a specific individual. Second, according to multiple hadith (records of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet), any dream featuring Muhammad "should be accepted with complete confidence as an authentic revelation because Satan does not have the power to assume the shape of God's Prophet."¹⁶ Thus the appearance of Muhammad is a legitimizing tool deeply rooted in Islamic epistemology. Based on this tradition, the veracity of Raja Tengah's revelation is therefore beyond reproach.

The Raja's unquestioning acceptance of Islam also reflects the humble obedience to God's will that sits at the very core of the Islamic faith. Just as Abraham surrendered himself,

¹⁵ Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 192-212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

nearly sacrificing his own beloved son (Ishmael in the Islamic tradition; Isaac in the Jewish and Christian traditions), so the Raja submits without protest and embraces a totally new belief system.¹⁷ This relates directly to the previous discussion of the mass conversions found in each of the stories – faith is about humble submission and orthopraxy, followed by the quest to better know God and his creation by immersing oneself in exhaustive study of the law (sharia/fiqh), the heart (Sufism), and the mind (philosophy). Once again, faith is the necessary foundation upon which these other sources of knowledge are built.

Rather than being mired in superstition and pre- or un-Islamic elements, these myths show an active engagement with Islamic motifs and epistemology, articulated through the localized cultural language of each community. The Eastern “edges” of the Islamic world were thus intimately connected to and conversant with larger Islamicate networks through which religious ideas were spread, debated, and interpreted. The frameworks through which these debates happened gave rise to impressive interpretive and practical diversity, but this diversity developed within the boundaries of an identifiably Islamic worldview. The abandonment of one’s previous identity is a decision that redefines both individual and communal relationships with all aspects of the universe. While Islamization was a gradual process, the idea that conversion happened haphazardly or on a purely surface-level defies logic and does not hold up to scrutiny. Instead, by appreciating the degree to which Islamic identity became and remains fundamental to Asian Muslims, we can gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of both Islam and of Muslims themselves.

¹⁷ Ibid., 196.

Further Reading

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