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The Rise of Muslim Coastal States in North Sumatra

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North Sumatra played a significant role in international maritime trade as a production base for precious forest and mineral products from early centuries, and pepper from early modern times. Contacts with the outside world through trade helped to develop coastal entrepôts exporting products from the interior. North Sumatran port cities connecting the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait became not only highly cosmopolitan urban areas, but, at the same time, established firm ties with their hinterlands from early on. The linkage between the



Figure 1 Muslim Funerary Monuments at Pasai. Photograph by M. Hirosue.



Figure 2 Rice Cultivation on the Shore of Lake Toba. Photograph by M. Hirosue.

coastal port and the hinterland has been one of the most important issues for scholars interested in the history and political culture of maritime Southeast Asia. The coastal port needed the hinterland for its products, and the hinterland needed the coastal port in order to barter for such necessities as salt and cotton cloths. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam helped local rulers in their efforts to glorify their kingly roles as mediators between foreign traders and the hinterland population. The acceptance of Islam by those rulers resulted in the strengthening of ties both within the Islamic world and with the hinterland.

Although Muslim Arab and Persian traders were visiting Southeast Asia from at least the 8th century, it was from the end of the 13th century that north Sumatran coastal rulers began to embrace Islam, in order to reinforce their authority in the midst of a rapid influx of Muslim traders from west and south Asia and Chinese traders from east Asia. Sufi orders played an important role in the conversion of Southeast Asian rulers to Islam, as pointed out by A. H. Johns.

In order to respond to increased demands by visiting merchants for local products, Sumatran coastal rulers needed to mobilize their hinterland people more effectively. While there is no doubt that the military superiority of the coastal rulers may have provided them with the means to exercise control over their hinterlands, nevertheless it was difficult for them to consistently control affairs in the interior and particularly to guarantee that the agricultural system would allow the people to collect and cultivate their products. In this context, the coastal ruler needed to associate his power with the fertility of agricultural production in the hinterland. Sufism helped to develop the kind of divine power and influence for these rulers to strengthen ties with their peoples.

The royal chronicles of Sumatran Muslim coastal states give us interesting examples of the rulers' conversion to Islam and the establishment of relationships between them and the hinterland. *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (The Royal Chronicle of Pasai) is one case in point, claiming that the first ruler of Samudera was a son conceived between a mother born from bamboo and a father raised by an elephant. Before he established Samudera, he had traveled into its interiors and gained support from the people, who praised his wealth accumulated by his supernatural powers. After he became a ruler of Samudera, he had a revelation from Muhammad in a dream who ordered him to call himself Sultan Malikul Saleh and to follow teachings from Syeikh Ismail coming from Mecca. The chronicle clearly implies that Sultan Malikul Saleh's legitimacy as the ruler of Samudera is based both upon support from the hinterland people and upon a revelation from Muhammad himself.

Samudera=Pasai became a prosperous coastal entrepôt which attracted traders from the East and the West and was recognized as a leading Islamic center among Muslim states of Southeast Asia during the 14th and 15th centuries. Although Pasai's royal chronicle mentions that a group of people who refused to accept Islam fled from Samudera into the interior, relations between the hinterland population and the coastal city was so firmly established that by the early sixteenth century, Pasai merchants were itinerating into the hinterland to trade with the people of north Sumatra, according to Tomé Pires.

The prosperity of Muslim coastal cities often led to the further development of hinterland agricultural society. Royal chronicles of Barus suggest that the coastal rulers associated themselves with the interior authority which the local population believed was connected with the fertility of their agricultural production. Before Barus was placed under the influence of Aceh in the 1530's, there were two royal families: one of Downstream Barus (Barus Hilir) and the other of Upstream Barus (Barus Ulu). Barus, a port city well-known from early times for its exports of good quality of camphor and gold, may have adopted Islam as early as Samudera, for *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals) tells that before reaching Samudera, Syeikh Ismail first arrived at Barus and converted its inhabitants to Islam.

The royal chronicles of Barus Ulu and Barus Hilir claim that both royal families had firm connections not only with the regions providing forest products, but also with productive rice-cultivating regions. The royal chronicle of Barus Ulu says that the royal family originated from the Toba Batak clan residing on the shore of Lake Toba. Another Barus Hilir chronicle claims that the first ruler, Sultan Ibrahim, a descendant of the royal family of Pagaruyung in central Sumatra, traveled not only to the inner Toba Batak regions, which produced camphor and benzoin, but also to Bakkara, a rice-cultivating region on the shore of Lake Toba, before he established himself at Barus. The shores of Lake Toba were some of the most fertile rice cultivating regions in Sumatra. Barus itself also relied on foodstuffs from the hinterland.

The center of authority in hinterland was crystallized as the coastal principalities became prosperous. Barus became a busy and flourishing coastal city attracting Indian, Persian, and Arab merchants at the beginning of the 16th century. The royal chronicle of Barus Hilir claims that Ibrahim was married in Bakkara to a local girl who was converted to Islam and that he ordered the people to regard her coming child as his deputy to be called Singa Maharaja. Singa Maharaja was addressed among the Toba Batak people as Si Singa Mangaraja. The people revered him as an incarnation of Batara Guru, possessing the supernatural power to control of the growth of rice and the supply of the water essential to its cultivation. This holy figure was also revered by the people under the influence of Barus Ulu and by the Batak deputies installed by the Sultan of Aceh.

The coastal rulers, such as those of Barus and Aceh, needed such a divine authority in order to keep stable relations between the coastal principalities and their hinterlands. The Pagaruyung royal house in the Minangkabau highland and the Gayo deputies installed by Aceh around Lake Tawar in north Sumatra also need to be examined vis-à-vis their roles in maintaining relationships between port cities and hinterlands. Although the research so far has tended to interpret such hinterland authorities as culturally different from Islamic coastal societies, it must be noted that hinterland cultures and societies including their image of “Sumatra” developed when Pasai, Aceh, Barus, and other Muslim coastal principalities endeavored to establish trade networks between the East and the West and claimed to lead Islamic centers.

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Melaka: A Model of Malay Islamic States

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In analyzing Islamic development in early modern Southeast Asia, other studies have paid attention to [a], [b], and [c] as shown below. On the other hand, as mentioned in [d], several arguments have been made on the pre-colonial Malay political culture.

[a] Melaka Model: An Exemplary Model

Major Malay port-polities in Melaka Strait area played a very significant role in developing Islamic civilization within Insular Southeast Asia. In this period, Pasai, Melaka, Aceh, Johor, and Riau-Johor (or Johor-Riau), in this order, each grew to be the center of trade and functioned as the center of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia. In the second

half of the 15th century, Melaka was an exemplary model of the Islamic state to the neighboring states and also contributed much to the spread of Islam through its trading network to the eastern islands like Java and Borneo.

[b] Aceh Model: Another Exemplary Model

From the second half of the 16th century to the first half of the next century, Aceh became a center of Islamic learning and wished to achieve a more Islam-oriented state. While inviting Muslim scholars (of both foreign and local origin) who studied in West Asia, Aceh appointed them to top posts (*Syaiif al-Islam*) in the Islamic administration. Those who held such posts played an active role in Islamic administration of Aceh, which supplied the neighboring Islamic states with a new exemplary model. This Aceh model was more Islamic-oriented than the Melaka model.

[c] The 17th Century: A Turning Point in the History of Islam in Southeast Asia

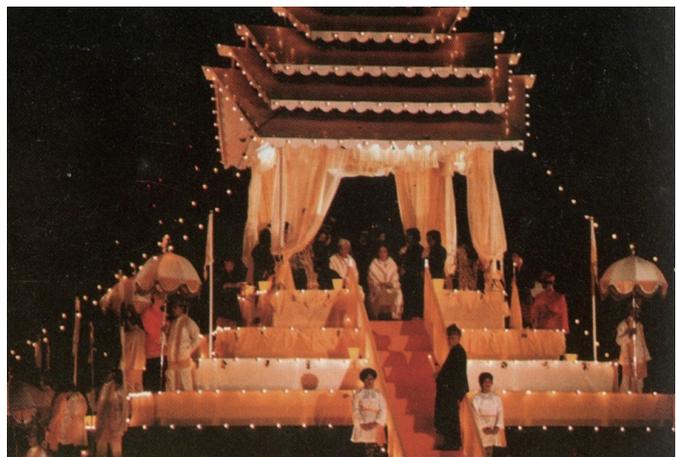


Figure A Scene after the *Bersiram Tabal* (bathing) Ceremony on the *Panca Persada* Stage during the Enthronement Ceremony of Perak in Malaysia, Dated December 11, 1985. [Source: Jawatankuasa Panel Penulis Khas 1986: 43]