

Some Historical Connections between Bangladesh and Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia and Bangladesh are two countries with Muslim majority. The relationship between the two countries is getting closer that can be seen from the cooperation built by the two states. The two states have a long historical relationship because they have some similarities, for example, they have the same culture, the same writing, and the same language. They have intensive contact in trade. This paper explains the historical relationship of Indonesia and Bangladesh that has been built for a long time. This paper finds that the relationship getting closer and closer between Indonesia and Bangladesh nowadays is the continuity of the long historical relationship; it is not the new one for the two countries.

Keywords: Bilateral Relationship, Indonesia-Bangladesh, Muslim Majority

A. Introduction

Nowadays, the relationship between Indonesia and Bangladesh has been entering the new era. It is because the relationship of the two states is getting closer viewed from some bilateral cooperation. The cooperation consisting of the aspects of education, culture, and trade is increasing from year to year. ANTARA news reported that Indonesia is included in the six biggest trade partners of Bangladesh¹.

¹ One of the contemporary developments of the relationship of the two states is shown from the special meeting between the President of Indonesia, Jokowi, and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, at the agenda of Asian-Africa Conference, on 23rd April 2015. Both leaders agreed to support the cooperation on the trade and investment

The fact that both are the majority Muslim states and the same members of UN, AAC, NM, IKI, D-8, G77, ARF, and some other cooperation forums of the developing states has made Indonesia and Bangladesh have the same perspective and interest of some regional or international issues². The harmonic relationship has been built since the era of Bangladesh Independence Day on 26th March 1971. In this case, Indonesia is one of the first states formally recognizing the Bangladesh independence that is in February 1972. So, Indonesia has a big role in building the close bilateral relationship with Bangladesh.

It is important to note that the relationship of the two states has the very strong historical root. The relationship between Indonesia/ Malaya area and Bangladesh actually is not the new one because some centuries ago the relationship has been built especially in trade and culture. At that time the relationship has been built between the South Asia regions, which are located in the part of the Hindi Island, and the Archipelago (read: Indonesia) in the Southeast of Asia. In the past each region was known as Hindi, in which the front Hindi nowadays is known as South Asia and the behind Hindi nowadays is known as Southeast Asia. This short paper discusses the relationship in the historical sector from some aspects. In turns, this one will be the strong foundation to make a harmonic relationship at the present and in the future.

B. Similarity of Original Culture

At the beginning, both states, indeed, had similarities in the original culture aspect. Original culture in fact is only filled and understood by the citizens of each region. This shows that the relationship has been started from the same primordial awareness. The similarities can be seen in some archaic culture believed by the local society, for example, animism, dynamism, *veteism*, and shamanism.

sectors for each of the both states. <http://www.antaranews.com/berita/492461/indonesia-bangladesh-sepakat-dorong-kerja-sama-perdagangan>, accessed on 20th June 2016.

² Taken from <http://www.kemlu.go.id/dhaka/id/Pages/Bangladesh.aspx>, accessed on 20th June 2016.

Animism is the doctrine believing that each thing has animus or soul assumed to have influence for human being, such as azimuth, stick, and some others. Dynamism is the belief in which each thing has a power, such as mountain, stone, and some others. *Veteism* is the belief that one thing has *mana* (unseen power). Shamanism³ is the doctrine believing that the soul can be someone⁴.

In the context of Indonesia, culture at least develops in five stages: (a) pre-cultural development, (b) cultural development of Hindu, (c) cultural development of Buddha, (d) cultural development of Islam, and (e) after the cultural development of Islam⁵. In this case, in the era of pre-cultural development, relatively there was no cultural influence from the outside. Some beliefs above are the cultures which stage develops separately and they just develop in the certain places or areas and it is still believed by the rural society today⁶.

C. Writing and Language

Besides the cultural sector, in the aspect of language and writing system, both states also have a strong relationship. There are four components in writing as follows: language, system of writing, subject of writing, and content⁷. Writing system developing in Indonesia reflects the intensive contact with the other community. According to Taylor, it is represented by training and journey conducted by the professional typewriters from the Archipelago (Indonesia)⁸.

³ The activity of the society believes shamanism can be viewed as similar to the activity of *khajur bhangga* (picking korma fruit) in the rural area of Bangladesh, mainly in the area of Jessore and around.

⁴ M. Abdul Karim, *Islam Nusantara* (Yogyakarta: Gramasurya, cet. 3, 2014), pp. 136-137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁶ Doeliman, *Ethnografic Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Percetakan Stensil "A S.", 1955), pages. 26-35 and M. Abdul Karim, *Bulan Sabit di Gurun Gobi: Sejarah Dinasti Mongol Islam* (Yogyakarta: Suka Press, 2014), pp. 50-51.

⁷ Jean G. Taylor, *Indonesia; People and Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 28-29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

Sanskrit language, which is believed to grow and develop in East India (Bangladesh and its surrounding), is one of the first languages introduced in Indonesia. This one can be seen from the *Kawi* language (Old Javanese), which is one of the archaic languages of the Indonesian people, especially in Java, which has rooted from Sanskrit. The system of Pali (Pallawa) writing from Southeast India and Nagari from North India is also the first writing system that was firstly used in the Archipelago of Indonesia. It can be viewed from some epigraphs found in some areas of Indonesia from the 5th to the 8th centuries. Those epigraphs use Sanskrit and the writing system of Pali⁹.

Starting from the 9th century, the word form used in Java inscription has shown the modification from the Pali (Pallawa) system. This proves that at that time the professional typewriters had grown and concentrated. So the young typewriters learned from the local typewriters and they did not have to make a journey to India for studying because in this century the Kawi or Old Javanese had been used and had developed continuously until it became the language of Modern Javanese (New Javanese). The word system of *ha, na, ca, ra, ka* based on the words of Dewanagari, which are called script, were used to write the Wed book and the formal document of the kingdom¹⁰.

It is important to note, in this case, that of the two regions (Indonesia and Bangladesh) there have been some intensive cultural contacts showing that the Indonesian people are the open society since the beginning. In the context of language and writing system, it can be viewed from the Pegon writing system that developed after the intensification of the Islamic doctrine, such as Sanskrit that is the key access to “transferring” philosophy and Hinduism doctrine coming from East India at the time, which now is known as Bangladesh and its surrounding. The Arabic writing is also an important aspect in studying Islam in both states. In the

⁹ Besides Pali, some in scripts were also written in Nagari script, which was the formal written system in Bali before XI century. The oldest epigraphy found in Bali came from the year of 882 using Nagari script. After that, entering XI Century, Kawi language was used.

¹⁰ Karim, *Islam*, pp. 140-142.

contemporary development, the writing system of Latin is finally used by the Indonesian people as the way of accommodation towards the West influence, whereas until today Bangladesh still maintains Bangla (part of the Sanskrit) as the formal language of the state and uses English as the second language.

D. Dimension of Religion

In the aspect of religion, the two states also have a strong emotional relationship. The relationship was initially built through the spreading of Hindu-Buddha from India, including from the Great Bengal toward the Archipelago, in which now the majority of the area that belongs to Indonesia.

Pandit Jauharlal Nehru noted in his book, *The Glimpses of History* (London: 1949), that when the Indian people (South Asia) came to the Archipelago at the first time, Indonesia and its surrounding had started entering its new era that is the era of history. King Azi Caka, which is known as Raja Aji Saka in Indonesia, came from India at that time and established the Kingdom of Hindu in Java Island for the first time. It can be proved through an existing cultural heritage that is Year of Caka. In the western calendar, Year of Caka began in 78 AD. Since then, all the kings of Java, including the king of Mataram I and of Majapahit, used the Caka calendar system.

It should be marked that the intimate relationship between South Asia and Indonesia was built especially after the exoduses of Buddhism of coming to the archipelago as a result of inter-religious violence. Interestingly, the Hindus-Buddhists lived side by side with tenderness after arriving in the archipelago, which is in Java-Sumatra and their surroundings. One reason is because the geographical location of Indonesia has very strategic and very conducive climatic influences and also has the accommodating state philosophy called Pancasila¹¹.

For the record, at the time of Emperor Dharma Pal (Pala) (778-810 AD and Deb Pal 810-845 AD) that covered the whole territory of

¹¹ This phenomenon then becomes one of the biggest contributions in Indonesian nation moral building. Karim, *Islam*, pp. 142-243.

India at that time, except Sind and Punjab, which capital was located in Cannyochozoo (near Allahabad), the interfaith cooperation was established in harmony. At that time, University of Nalanda, which is located in Eastern India today, approximately between Dinajpur-Rangpur, North Bangladesh-Nepal, was one of the educational centers of Buddhism in Asia and Kalacran (Kalasan), Prambanan (near Yogyakarta, Indonesia) throughout the East and Southeast Asia. As the proofs, Kalacran Temple (700 Saka / 778 AD), Borobudur Temple (Buddhist, 823 AD), and Prambanan (Hindu) Temple are standing on. It is the reminiscent of the golden era of inter-religious harmony in Indonesia. The temples were established during the Sailendra Dynasty (Buddhism), when the Emperor Bangla established a good relation with South-East Asia Region.

In 860 AD, King Balaputra Deb / Deva, the kingdom of Sriwijaya in Sumatra, sent an ambassador to King Bangla (Bengal), which aimed at asking permission from the Emperor Bangla in order to build a Bihara (monastery) for the pupils and students coming from Swarnabhumi (Sumatra) and Swarnadwipa (Java) who studied Buddhism at Nalanda University, which is now located in the Eastern part of India.

Musa Ansary's research, which is related to this, stated the similarities between the models of a Buddhist temple at Paharpur, Bangladesh and those of Borobudur temple in Central Java, Indonesia. In Bangladesh there are some great temples as the representative of Theravada Buddhist temple located in Bondorbon (Bandarban Golden Temple) as the biggest temple in Bangladesh even in the world. Also, Puthia Temple near Rajshahi region is the biggest Hindu temple in Bangladesh¹². It reflects the existence of a close religious and cultural contact between Hindu-Buddha in the era.

Furthermore, after the changing of political constellation in the Arab world, in which Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad was managed to spread and to be accepted by the Arab tribes, the territories in the regions such as Iran, Indian Sub-Continent, Indonesia, and even China were also influenced by the teachings and

¹² <https://e.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/buddha-dhatu>, accessed June 7, 2016.

the spread of Islam in their respective areas. Therefore, the spread of Islam in the Eastern Regions could not be removed from trading activities centered in the Indian Ocean.

After Islam has been spread in Indonesia through the trade activities, it turns out that Islam in Indonesia was also well received by the local community. This is the difference between the spread of Islam in Indonesia with that in other states. In Indonesia, in fact, Islam was spread by the way of penetration pacifique or was spread peacefully, away from violence by sword or conquest.

While demographically, the factor of Islam religion has also fairly strong and binding historical roots between the two states. For example, besides the Silk Road connecting Mecca with the Southeast Asian region via Transoxiana, Singkiyang (now Sinjiyang), and Cantone (Modern Hong Kong), Islam entered Indonesia through South Asia. Based on *Journal, Asiatic Society of Pakistan* quoted by Prof. Dr. Abdul Karim, the history once recorded the occurrence of a war between Caliph al-Walid I under Governor General Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, who sent his war commander, Muhammad ibn Qasim to Sind and the Punjab region. One of the causes of the Arab-Indian war was the hijacking drama on eight Muslim merchant vessels that would be presented to the Caliph al-Walid I by King *JaziratulYaqut* - the island of Java¹³, which is suspected of the King of Kalingga.

While the first Islamic dynasty in Indonesia, Samudera Pasai, is the dynasty founded by Merah Silau (Malik as-Salih) originated from East India (Bangla)¹⁴. Thus, the relationship between Bangladesh that is located between the Bay of Bengal and the western Indonesia that is Aceh has been lasting since the end of the past. Geographically, Aceh is the northernmost of Sumatra Island. It is the most strategic location for trade and shipping route because it functions as a transit port connecting the Gulf of Bengal as the trade zone region with the

¹³ Abdul Karim, *Bharatiya Upamahadesh-e- Muslim Shahsan* (Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1972), pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ ...the founder of the [*Samudra Pasai*] dynasty, merah Silau, was a foreign settler. Both *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* bear out his foreign origin. But from which country did he come? Tomé Pires [Potugis], the author of *Suma Oriental*... suggests that he came from Bengal: S. Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute LTD, 1963), p. 12 and 23.

western region of Sumatra Island. The merchants who came to Sumatra and enlivened the Aceh port brought many commodities such as pottery, iron, steel, cotton, and diamonds, which were bartered with incense, camphor, pepper, including porcelain coming from China¹⁵.

Based on the historical information, it can be concluded that the relation between the two states (Indonesia and Bangladesh) has existed a long time ago, since Hindu-Buddha firstly appeared to the arrival of Islam. Later, the relationship between the two is also more intimate after the Independence of Bangladesh.

E. Trade Contact in the Past

Trade activity between the two states has been tied for a long time. By that activity, the economic relation has been built since a long time in the past. Besides, the trade contact also opened the large ways of the cultural and religious contact¹⁶. In the context of religion, Muslim merchants of Karamondel (Bay of Bengal), for example, were accustomed to enter the Sumatera Sea (Indrapura and its surrounding). There were about 200 persons from Bangale. Sir Thomas Arnold said that in Bangladesh itself the Muslim scholars reached their greatest success if viewed from the quantity¹⁷. It is not different from Hamka's theory about three stages of the Islamization of the Kingdom of Indrapura, West Sumatera those are: (1) Islam came to Indonesia brought by the Arab and Karamondel merchant, then it arrived to Barus, Central Tapanuli of North Sumatera Province and west beach of the West Sumatera. (2) Islam came brought by the Sufi and the professional *Muballigh* (religious leader).

¹⁵ Gusti Asnan, *Dunia Maritim Pantai Barat Sumatera* [Maritime World, Western Coast of Sumatra] (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2007), p. 55. and Sudirman, "*Jaringan Perniagaan dan Islamisasi di Kerajaan Inderapura Abad XVII dan Awal Abad XVIII M*", Yogyakarta: Dissertation, State Islamic University, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2016, p. 143 and 151.

¹⁶ This one is explored by Graaf: *that Islam was propagated in south –East Asia by three methods: that is by Muslim traders in the course of peaceful trade, by preachers, and holy men who set out from India and Arabia specifically to convert unbelievers and increase the knowlwdge of the faithful....* H. J. Graaf, South Asian Islam" to the eighteen Cencury" with P. M. Holt, at al (ed.) *Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. II* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 123.

¹⁷ Fatimi, *Islam Come.*, p. 23

(3) Islam grew fast through the ways of trade and politics¹⁸. The Islamization of the rural citizen by the merchants of the Bay of Bengal gave the maximum result. So, most of the citizens in the center of the gold and chili trade embraced Islam¹⁹.

In this case, the way of Islam coming to Indonesia was through the harbors such as the harbor of Shiraf, Guardar (Persian Gulf), Daibul (near to Karachi, Pakistan), Malabar, Koromondel (Chittagong, the harbor in Bangladesh), the harbor in Malaya Peninsula, which later was connected to Kanton harbor (Hongkong/China). Far before the West came to the Archipelago, there had been three international trade networks those are: (1) a network through the Bay of Bengal, centered at Koromondel beach. Many historians, including Morrison, Thomas W. Arnold, and the others said that far before the 17th century, Koromondel and Malabar were the transformation center of the archipelago (Indonesia) religiosity, even in the Southeast Asia. The reason given by Morrison is Syafi'i's influence found in the citizens of Koromondel and in most Indonesian people, whereas, Thomas Arnold said that the beach, the Bay of Bengal (Koromondel) was the place to live and to meet for the Muslim merchants coming from Arab, Persia, and India (Malabar). Besides, based on the analyses of Dobing and Arnold, along the line of north beach of Indrapura Kingdom, which is now is included in the region of West Sumatera, it protruded to the north until reaching Koromondel Beach in Bangladesh and its surrounding, which now connects to the Middle East²⁰.

Based on Nurdin Hussin's analysis, in the 18th century, the Bengal (Koromondel) had been fulfilled by the traders coming from the port in Nusantara²¹. In this case, he filled the analysis with some

¹⁸ Hamka, *Sejarah Umat Islam IV* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1981), p. 24

¹⁹ Asnan, *Dunia Maritim*, p. 149.

²⁰ Thomas W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam, History of Propagation of The Muslim Faith* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 363 and 36, Eleanor Selling, "The Evolution of Trading States in South-East Asia before the 17th Century." "Dissertation". (Columbia University, 1981), hlm.65. This one can be seen in the map of Rahmad Abdullah, *Walisongo: Gelora Dakwah dan Jihad Tanah Jawa (1404-1582 M.)*, (Solo: al-Wafi, 2015), p. 41 and attach 1, route map Laksamana Cheng Ho.

²¹ Nurdin Hussin, *Trade and Society in The Straits of Melaka; Dutch Melaka, and English Penang* (Denmark: Nias Press, 2007), p. 4 and 15.

traders coming from some ports of the Archipelago, especially from Java and Sumatra. The majority of traders came from India (Koromandel/Bengal in the 16th to 17th M) to sell valuable items such as: silk, porcelain, and ceramics²². While the commodity trade brought in by foreign merchants from the archipelago are gold, lime, pepper, and a few other forest products including honey, wax, tier, sulfur, iron, rattan, cotton, and rice and other foodstuffs²³.

The relation between the two states actually cannot be released from the trade with the Eastern, like the Indian, the black Indian, and the coastal southern China. There are three areas to which the trade is also connected directly, and the traders from the Arab world, the East of Africa, the Mediterranean is connected to Europe.

In such cases, Fernand Braudel said that the geography strongly supports the establishment of trade among the port, the island, and the continents in Nusantara. It was driven by the mutual behavior (reciprocity), the sharing behavior, and the behavior exchange²⁴. According to Lombard research, “*Nusantara* (Indonesia)” is located in the cross road between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean or more particular, between the Bangla (Bengal) and China. The strategic *Nusantara* are western eyes, which are also called *Mooi Indie*, which have very exotic nature, dense jungle, rhythm, dancer, and terracing rice fields²⁵. It was the recognition of the Indonesian beauty and it became the tourism brochures attracting the West Tourists²⁶.

One of the evidence that the trade contact between both states have been tied since the past is the unique term in Bangladesh known as *Java Cini/Java sugar*. Until today the term is very popular in

²² Sudirman, “*Jaringan Pertiagaan*”, p. 143

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and The Mediterranean World in The Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper Colophon Books 1988), p. 36. and Sudirman, “*Jaringan*”, p. 23.

²⁵ Based on the West Historian, it’s not doubt that Indonesia is the heaven of the world.

²⁶ Denys Lombard, *Nusa Jawa: Silang Budaya, Jilid I: Batas-batas Pebaratan*, terj. Winarsih Partaningrat dkk (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama Forum Jakarta-Paris, 2008), p. 11 and 43.

Bangladesh and its surrounding areas, especially in the countryside. It is because Java is indeed an island with sugar cane as one of its main produce. This is presumably due to the intense and harmonious relation in the era of the Kingdom of the Archipelago such as King of Sailendra and Sri Wijaya who established the close contact with the Maharaja of Bangla. Thus, the agricultural commodities including sugar were supplied from Java or exported to Bangla when possible.

F. Conclusion

Some analyses bring to a historical reflection that provides the basis of bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Bangladesh today. The relation is a continuation of historical stories in the past. With the same cultural primordial identity, the two states have built a contact very intensely including the contact culture that is represented by the language and writing, the contact religion, and the trade relation between the two states. All these contacts cannot be presented as the trading activities and facilities today. This relation should be continued until now, especially since the Bangladesh Independence Day in 1971. Some engagements in various fields including economic, education, culture, and facets relate to each other.

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