The Spread of Mosques in Pre-Independence Malay Peninsula: A Digital Representation

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Abstract—The coming of Islam to the Malay Peninsula was established after Hinduism had spread throughout the Malay Archipelago. However, different theories abound on the arrival of Islam to the region. At the University of Malaya, a project was conducted to locate sites of mosques built before 1960 in the Malay Peninsula. This presentation is part of a major project on constructing a digital cultural atlas of places of worship built before the independence of Malaya. Fieldwork was conducted to obtain and verify Geographic Information system (GIS) information and interviews were carried out at sites of mosques around the states of West Malaysia. Interviews with informants providing the oral history of the sites to give a richer insight about the mosques. Information gathered is transferred to a digital map of the peninsula to show the location of mosques in each state and images of the mosques. Based on the sites of these mosques and the date they were built, we hope to trace the pattern and perhaps establish the timeline when Islam spread in the Malay Peninsula.

Keywords— *Mosques; digital atlas; Islam; cultural heritage; Malay Peninsula; oral history.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Records of traders, pilgrims and travelers from the Orient and the Occidental passing through the Straits of Malacca have been documented. The history of such travels to the Malay peninsula has been recorded even before the 3rd century. These were also written in Jawi and ancient Malay (*Melayu Kunno*) documents that wrote on the history of the region, in particular the Malay Peninsula (now West Malaysia), the maritime religious tracks and the local knowledge of the people living in the area during the identified period.

As to when Islam arrived to this Malay Archipelago, four points of origin were named: Arabia, India, China and Champa [1]. Upon its arrival, the peoples of this region were either animists, Hindus or Buddhists. Hinduism was accepted even before the 1st century in the Archipelago and South-East Asia that included the major Malay kingdoms in Indochina, Kalimantan, the islands of Sumatera and Java as well as the Malay peninsula. Until the 15th century the Indochina kingdoms that stretched up to southern Thailand practiced Buddhism.

Within this same era existed two well-known kingdoms before the arrival of Islam, the Malayu Kingdom and Srivijaya. The Malayu Kingdom was born in the 7th century and was situated in the southern part of Sumatera (now Jambi

region) and received traders from Arab, India and China passing through the Straits of Malacca. Hinduism was practiced and the Malay language was its official language as well as for trading. Historians acknowledged that the terms “*Melayu*” and the origin of the Malay language as the language of the Nusantara or Archipelago was derived from this Malayu Kingdom.

The Srivijaya kingdom ruled from the 7th to 13th century and took over the control of the Malacca Straits. The people practiced Hindu-Buddhist religion and continued the use of the Malay language. This led to inheriting the Malay culture as the language was used both as the official and trading language in the region. The Malay Peninsula consisted of a few kingdoms before the arrival of Islam. This included *Ligor*, *Langkasuka*, *Kataha* (*Kedah Tua*) *Ho-Lan-Tan* (*Kelantan*), *Teng-ta-nung* (*Trengganu*) and *Gangga Negara* [2].

II. THEORIES ON THE ARRIVAL OF ISLAM TO THE ARCHIPELAGO

This section briefly describes the three main theories that involve the Malay Peninsula.

A. The Arrival of Islam from India

Gujerati traders were said to have spread Islam to the Archipelago as the trading between India and the merchants of the region have long been established [3], [4]. The evidence to support this is the gravestones carvings found in Gerisek, Jawa dating back to 1419 and that of Malikus Salleh in Pasai dating back to 1428. This was supported by the resemblance considered to be characteristics made in Gujarat [5].

B. Arrival of Islam from Arabia and Persia

The Arab traders were end route to China via the Maritime Silk Route crossing the Indian Ocean, Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Besides trading, they brought their Islamic faith to the region as they stopped by ports of call that included Patani, Kedah, Malacca, Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan [6]. The Arab and Persian traders also stopped at Perlak and Pasai to exchange goods with the local traders. It was noted that envoy from the Umayyah Dynasty was sent to the King of Srivijaya to offer a trade relationship as well as to accept the Islamic faith. It was much

later during the era of Khlifah Umar Abdul Aziz (717-720 AD) that the king embraced Islam in 718 AD [7].

C. Arrival of Islam from China and Champa

As traders from Arab and China have been trading before the advent of Islam in the 7th century, the first missionary was led by Wahab ibni Abi Kabsah Canton by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) [8]. A follow up was made by Saad ibni Abi Waqqas under Khalfah Uthman ibni Affan (664-656 AD) and it led to a foundation stone for the first mosque in Canton. However, a rebellion during the Tang Dynasty in 879 AD led to Muslims and many foreigners fleeing to Champa, Kedah Patani and Kedah. They help Islam to those areas as well.

Based on the above theories, a question still looms till today regarding who or rather which group brought Islam to the Malay Peninsula first. Thus, the aim of this study is to produce a cultural atlas of the Malay peninsula using the timeline starting from the period of the first known Jawi Malay manuscripts and inscriptions dating from the 5th century up to the point of Malaya's independence in 20th century. The information of events and their historical significance as well as sites will be mapped based on the information gathered from the literature review of past studies.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

1. To develop a digital cultural atlas which visually incorporates content about places of worship in the Malay peninsula
2. To integrate GIS technology and other spatial data with a distributed architecture and humanities content

II. METHOD

The study began with a compilation of information on mosques available from resources on the Malay Peninsula between 5th century up to the 20th century up to the date of independence of Malaya. Information obtained includes the geographic Information System (GIS) of the identified mosques.

Fieldwork was conducted in the states of Malacca, Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang and Terengganu. These coastal states were indicated to have been visited by seafarers that would include traders, pilgrims and travelers [9], [10].

Inspection of geographical coordinates collected from past studies and websites were verified before they are included in the map. At various sites, both audio recordings and images were collected as well as the oral history and description of the site/place. The GIS locations were tabulated to show location and dates they were built. The final stage is the construction of a platform for the cultural atlas to upload the information. The platform is to display text, images, hyperlinks, tabular data, and multimedia applications in one interface to enable interactive viewing and dynamic presentation of the material with a possibility of online community input of information in the future. The digital map built as a platform was inserted with information to plot the different sites in different states to show the distribution of mosques.

At the point of completing this paper, this stage is in progress and information that include images, GIS information and brief description of the sites are being uploaded.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The list of mosques that were reputed to be the oldest in each state were tabulated based on the dates they were built. For some of the mosques, even the official state portals did not have the dates or stated the estimated period of construction. The following table lists the oldest mosques in state in West Malaysia.

TABLE 1
LIST OF OLDEST MOSQUES BEFORE 1900

State	Mosque	Year
Malacca	Masjid Lama Machap	1511
*Terengganu	Masjid Hiliran	1708-33
Malacca	Masjid Tengker	1728
*Kelantan	Masjid Kampung Laut	1730s
Pulau Pinang	Masjid Jamek Batu Uban	1734
Pulau Pinang	Masjid Melayu Lebu Acheh	1792
*Terengganu	Masjid Abidin	1793
Kedah	Masjid Pengkalan Kakap	1800
Negeri Sembilan	Masjid Jamek Dato' Bandar Haji Ahmad	1800
Pulau Pinang	Masjid Kapitan Keling	1801
Kuala Lumpur	Masjid India	1863
*Kelantan	Masjid Muhammadi	1867
Kedah	Masjid Langgar	1871
Perlis	Masjid Lama Arau	1873
Kedah	Masjid Kota Raja Kuala Muda	1880
Kuala Lumpur	Masjid Jamek Kg Baru	1880
Pahang	Masjid Lama Pulau Tawar	1880
Johor	Masjid Jamek Sultan Ibrahim Muar	1890s
Johor	Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar	1892

*East coast states of West Malaysia

Table 1 shows that the earliest and the older mosques are mostly located on the west coast of the peninsula. Although the earliest mosque was built in Malacca in 1511, there was a gap of mosques dated between the 16th and 17th century. The next period of construction mosques were within the same 18th century, in Pulau Pinang and both states of Kelantan and Terengganu in the East coasts. At this juncture, relying only on the dates of construction may require other form of documentation and historical evidence. This would include investigation of the contending theories of arrival of Islam from India and Champa or China. Consider Masjid Kampung Laut that was built in the 18th century in Trengganu in which the structure has similarities with that of Masjid Kono in Champa and two mosques in Thailand, namely, Masjid Nad Tanjung and Masjid Wadi Hussien. This is an indication of the track taken if it can be used to trace the path taken by pilgrims.

IV. CONCLUSION

This project is still underway in constructing a cultural atlas of

the Malay peninsula. This project will be extended in plotting the sites of other places of worship to provide the bigger picture as to the arrival of other religions before the pre-independence period. It is hoped that it will be continuously updated once open to the public as a wiki.

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