# ISLAMIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE PERIPHERY OF MALUKU, INDONESIA

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**ABSTRACT**

The article explores Islam as an element of the social and symbolic formations created in the context of long-distance trade relations in the Aru and the Kei islands of southeast Maluku. The Muslim migrants and traders who settled in the area in the early colonial period created places that served as entry points to the local, autochthonous society. Even as these sites allowed Muslims to control access to local, cultural domains, they allured local people with possible access to trade wealth and mobility. By creating conceptual and tangible boundaries around the indigenous domain, early Islam anticipated the contrast between universally valid religious convictions and materially embedded cultural forms. This contrast became significant after the large-scale conversions to Christianity and Islam in the late colonial period. Islam was also transformed by its interaction with various cosmopolitan discourses, but it has remained more accommodating than Christianity towards socially embedded ritual practices and material symbols. This raises the question whether 'cultural Islam' should be defined by its neutral, apolitical attitude towards the secular state which is complicated by the fact that the culturally embedded Islam in Maluku took form in the absence of centralised state power.

**KEYWORDS**
boundaries; complexity; Islam; Maluku; religion

## Introduction

When Portuguese explorers first arrived at the spice-trading ports of Maluku in 1512, they found that the people living there had converted to Islam a few decades earlier. The parallel advance of Islam and Christianity in the archipelago happened in a piecemeal fashion, and for a long time their practice was limited to political and commercial centres in which they were one among several different sources of authority and prestige. It was only in the missionary era of the late 19th century that Maluku became a

frontier for religious conversion on a larger scale. As the colonial state of the Dutch East Indies expanded its administration to far-flung populations outside Java, religion became a distinct domain of personal and group identity, visible as a string of mosques and churches along the coasts of eastern Indonesian islands.

The aim of this article is to understand how Islam has interacted with other symbolic complexes and belief systems in Maluku, and what role it has played in the religious transformations that started in the late colonial period. While the same questions can be asked about Christianity, the interest of focusing on Islam lies in the way in which Islam has co-existed and sometimes affirmed local languages and social practices that became extinct among many Christian groups. Early interactions between Islam and other systems taught people different possibilities of enacting the kinds of symbols and ideas that people later came to identify with *agama*, or religion (Kipp and Rodgers 1987: 4). Different forms of Islamic presence therefore lay the ground for the 19th century development in which Christianity and Islam turned into encompassing categories of identity for territorial groups.

In order to recognise the different forms of Islamic presence, it is useful to approach it as a complex of material symbols, disciplinary practices and institutions, that reproduce a particular experience of social boundaries and the value of personal life (Gibson 2007: 5). In the Muslim communities of Maluku, Islam co-exists with other symbols and practices that generate a radically different experience of personal being and its relationship to the external world. In many Austronesian societies, the hallmark of such experience is a profound unity of siblings and a sense of lasting debt towards ancestors, in-laws, and spirits: a pattern that differs from the stress that Islamic teachings put on the value of the individual.

Values only appear in contrast or conflict with each other in specific historical situations and concrete social formations. In exploring how the people of Maluku responded to Islam and other world religions in past centuries, we depend on narratives and traces of various encounters between traders and missionaries and the people they have visited in the archipelago. In the absence of encompassing political authority, leadership in local societies was claimed by people who had contacts to other places through trade and migration. Such people were attracted to Islam due to the authority and prestige of its association with distant polities, commercial empires, devotional traditions, and literary

networks. This situation allowed people to appropriate Islam in the form of objects and ritual titles claimed by specific kinship groups, or as concepts such as *hukum* (justice), that came to mean a particular local spirit or a ritual of atonement for breaking a taboo. As long as religion could be understood in such terms, it was not an encompassing ideological force but a material feature of social life.

This situation changed through colonial encounters that coincided with missionary activity which introduced religion as an explicit, vernacular category (Picard 2017: 18). Webb Keane (2007: 110) argues that Christian missions initially drew a line between religion and indigenous rituals but eventually came to include both in the 'sense-giving framework' that made Christianity meaningful for members of the local church. Christianity therefore did not simply replace former rituals and cosmologies but reframed them as culturally specific expressions of its own, universally valid faith (Keane 2007: 112). This accommodation of indigenous rituals was a long historical process, and the politics of missionary work involved a struggle over the control of symbols – crosses, altars, and the receptacles of traditional sacrifices – that marked the heightened spiritual quality of a particular site. While a similar kind of hierarchy today describes the relationship between Islam and local traditions, the missionary era was preceded by a period in which many peripheral communities struggled to incorporate the two in their own socio-cosmic order (Picard 2017: 21). Even in today's religious landscape, neatly divided between Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant territories, there is a persistent ambiguity between the understandings of Islam as a world religion and as a marker of a culturally specific ancestral world (Spyer 2000: 7).

In the first part of this article I discuss the forms of early Islamic presence in southeastern Maluku and the social formations it created in peripheral sites affected by inter-island trade. The question addressed in the second section is how Islam was affected by the new awareness of universal religions, Christian missions, and the importance that state power eventually gave to religious identity. I suggest that the religious transformation that started in the late 19th century did not create a homogeneous religious landscape. Different forms of Islamic knowledge still add to the complexity of indigenous societies in Maluku.

**Islam in the Maluku periphery**

Although the name Maluku is derived from *malik*, the Arabic word for 'king', the unity of societies in the archipelago was not based on political centralisation. According to Leonard Andaya (1993), even the sultanates of North Maluku drew their unity from legitimising myths. Their rulers claimed to have a privileged relationship to the destructive power of volcanoes and the energies of the soil (Andaya 1993: 28). In the idiom of unity found throughout Maluku, a polity was based on the alignment of four kings who aligned themselves around a fifth element, imagined as a destructive natural force (Andaya 1993: 31). These kings exemplified what Oliver Wolters (1982: 18) called men of prowess: persons distinguished by an excessive amount of personal, innate 'soul stuff'. In Wolters's argument, the contact with Indic religions eventually allowed such rulers to develop into divine kings. In Maluku, however, the charisma of rulers and chiefs partly derives from their origin in specific, powerful places. The unity of their domain would therefore have to be a specific world in which each group had its proper place (Andaya 1993: 40).

A social world defined by such domains and their loosely structured alliances does not allow religion to spread in a homogeneous way. The first outposts of Islam in the periphery of Maluku were trading sites in which a particular leader or elite group acted as an intermediary in the interactions with visiting traders. Trading rights in the Papuan coast were limited to visitors from specific places, sometimes related to their local hosts through kinship ties (Ellen 2003: 127). A similar pattern was found in the Kei islands where an outside trader had to give gifts to the local chief in order to begin organised trade with the subjects (Geurtjens 1921: 240). Often the local partner in these trade relations appears to have been a Muslim immigrant or convert. In the Aru islands, which became accessible to outside traders earlier than Papua or Kei, local trading rights appear to have been taken over by ethnically diverse outsiders that included Arab, Bugis, and Chinese settlers (Spyer 2000: 16).

The asymmetric relationship with visiting outsiders is a common historical experience in Aru, Kei, and Tanimbar – three local archipelagos that dominate the Arafura sea. Until the 19th century, the licensed traders of Banda known as burghers were afraid to visit them because the inhabitants saw it as their right to appropriate the cargo of any

ship that landed outside designated trading sites (Miller 1980: 50). But in spite of their refusal to see the larger world as a domain of reciprocal recognition and exchange, the people of these islands project an uncanny familiarity with the 'trade lands'. During my fieldwork in the Kei islands in the 1990s, I became used to stories about lost relatives who must be alive in a distant city or island because an occasional, unknown visitor had described meeting someone who looked just like them. Patricia Spyer (2000: 4) has described such talk as evidence of 'entanglement' with colonialism and modernity. In places like Aru and Kei, the intermittent presence of these historical forces has displaced social life in various ways, but the promise of wealth implied by trade continues to make them attractive. Due to their long historical experience of trading, local people wish to be part of a larger world, even though this world keeps pushing them into the margins, affirming its own superiority over local forms of life.

What is the role of Islam in the dynamics of entanglement? To address this question, we must consider the presence of Muslim traders in different parts of the archipelago. Reports by Dutch travellers from the 17th century note that Aru, an area with early commercial links to the Sulawesi kingdom of Makassar, was the site of seven mosques as early as in 1624 (Reid 2013: 45). It is noteworthy that the expansion of Islamic trade networks in southeast Maluku involved traders from places that rose into prominence after some formerly important entrepots, such as Banda, Malacca, and Banten, had been displaced by colonialism. After the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, Makassar arose to a similar prominence as an entrepot of regional trade until its conquest by Dutch and Bugis forces in 1669 (Andaya 1981). Banda, then known as the only source of commercial mace and nutmeg, was conquered in 1621 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) which massacred and enslaved most of its original population. The Banda people who escaped the massacre found refuge in the islands near the eastern tip of Seram, which soon took over Banda's role as the rendezvous for the Asian traders whose activity had been disrupted by the Dutch conquest of Banda (Ellen 2003; Kaartinen 2010: 39; Knaap 1987: 53). Some of the Banda sailed onwards to the Kei islands and founded two villages, Banda Elat and Banda Eli, where their ancestral language has survived to the present day.

Jacobus Vertrecht, a Dutch missionary who accompanied Adriaan Doortsman's expedition to Kei and Aru in 1646, was a witness to the early Muslim presence in these islands. One of the boats he encountered in southern Great Kei was commanded by a man who seemed to be a foreigner from Buton rather than a Kei, and after observing his armed retinue Vertrecht told him to not come on board unless he gave up his dagger (Heeres 1896: 690). Vertrecht's visit to Banda Elat, the village that today remains the main harbour of Great Kei, revealed that the immigrants from Banda had already gained a foothold in this island after their exile from the Banda islands two decades earlier. In addition to Elat, these people had another important settlement called Eli in northern Great Kei. Vertrecht's travel account lists several Banda place names that designate villages along the northeastern coast (Heeres 1896: 693). Among these, Oirato is probably an outlier of the main settlement of Eli, founded to give the Banda access to the good fishing grounds on the northern tip of the island. Haar, the village from which Alfred Russel Wallace famously launched his trip in a locally built boat, was known as Soirarat (Serat) in the Banda language. While Haar today is mostly a Catholic village, it includes a Muslim settlement with strong ties to Banda Eli.

Vertrecht's encounters with the Muslims in Great Kei appear to have suggested to him that the Aru islands were a more promising site for his proposed missionary work. In Aru, too, villagers were reluctant to allow the Dutch to land, and when Vertrecht learned that two Banda pilots had just accompanied a Javanese junk from Kei to the Aru islands (Heeres 1896: 704), it seemed obvious to him that the rumours they told to natives about the Dutch were the source of the suspicion he encountered here (Heeres 1896: 705).

The reason people of Kei and Aru avoided Dutch contact was probably not because they favoured Muslim rather than Christian visitors, but because each local area in these islands was aligned with a different group of foreign traders. Vertrecht was advised that Great Kei was divided in three chiefly domains, and the one in the southern part of the island preferred to trade with people from Macassar rather than Banda (Heeres 1896: 693). The immigrants from Banda, however, had settled in the central and northern part of Great Kei where they had probably been recognised as legitimate visitors in an earlier period. The people of Banda Eli insist that their ancestors migrated to Kei around 1600, a couple of decades before the Dutch took over in Banda. This suggests that the

early influence of Islam in Kei was based on the distribution of trading rights among several groups of overseas traders, some based in Macassar and Buton and others in Central Maluku. Owing to its division in distinct trading domains, the Kei islands had a more structured relationship to the outside world than Aru. Kei was also more accessible to pre-colonial traders from Banda who reached it by following the chain of islands between east Seram and the Kei archipelago.

In the Kei language, the chiefly domains (*heerlijckheden*) mentioned in Vertrecht's travel account are known as *lor*. Such units have remained remarkably stable for the entire period of recorded history. They suffered temporary political fragmentation during the ironwood boom that preceded the permanent colonisation of the islands in 1881 (Eijbergen 1866a: 254) but reunited in the early 19th century, partly in response to colonial efforts to limit the number of local chiefs and combine their domains under one raja (Adatrechtbundels 1922: 26). Overall, the Kei society manifests greater social and spatial differentiation than Aru where outside presence was concentrated in Dobo and Ujir, two islands in the closest approach of inbound boats. In Kei, the principal trading sites were not merely outposts of a trade network run by outsiders but seats of ritual authority and leadership by people who claimed an origin in Luang, Bali, and other distant islands in the west.

Islam is one of several ideological frameworks within which foreigners and autochthonous people in this island world have interpreted the asymmetrical power relations created by long-distance commerce. In the early colonial period, Islamic trading communities were themselves displaced by the advance of European power. This conjuncture intensified the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim groups in more peripheral areas, and in some places this interaction resulted in complex social formations in which Islam and indigenous cosmological practices were both present and provided the symbolic framework for organising everyday life. These socially differentiating effects of Islam will be discussed in the next section.

**Islamic encounters in the early colonial period**

When Vertrecht offered to teach Christianity to the Aru in 1646, people advised him that it would require that 'one of the blacks was chief over the others' (Heeres 1896: 699). In the local perception, then, new foreign ideas were not meaningful without social differentiation. Possibly this was a polite way of refusing to submit to the authority of the people who brought those ideas. But this does not mean that people were not interested in appropriating foreign objects or religious concepts without endorsing the significance they had for those who brought them. In principle, this could either mean the encompassment of the global, universal concepts and practices of Islam and Christianity by a local cultural order, or a persistent ambiguity between their local and global origin or nature. The Aru response to Vertrecht suggests that the idea of conversion posed a chicken-and-egg problem. Conversion only made sense if there was a politically differentiated society that was ready to commit to a single ideology, but such society would first have to be nudged into being by an external, pacifying power. In the absence of centralised power that could provide the necessary state effects, Vertrecht agreed that God himself would have to attract people's hearts to himself' (Heeres 1896: 699).

Oral tradition in the Kei islands tells about a similar encounter between recently arrived immigrants from Banda and the people of Tanimbar-Evav, an isolated island in the southern part of the Kei archipelago. Before settling in their final location in the Great Kei Island, the Banda visited numerous places in the Lesser Kei archipelago, attracted by landscapes that reminded them of the mountains in their native Banda. The village of Tanimbar-Evav is on a steep cliff overlooking a beach. The Bandanese entering this landscape saw immediately the potential for reproducing here the social form in which the spiritual energies of the soil co-exist with a form of leadership that draws its charisma from Islam. Although this arrangement would have accommodated the rituals and symbols of Tanimbar Evav, the people of the island rejected Islam because they viewed it as similar to 'flotsam' – foreign objects incompatible with the internal constitution of their society (Barraud 2017: 188).

According to a story known both in Banda Eli and Tanimbar-Evav, the Banda then built a wall across the beach (Barraud 1979: 31). A photograph of the entrance to Tanimbar-

Evav from 1893 shows two human figures guarding the village from Islam (Barraud, 2017 188). It is difficult to know whether this is a recent interpretation that reflects the relatively modern contrast between religion and tradition. Remarkably, however, both sides agree that the wall was built by the Muslims. Just as in Aru, the state-like effect that demarcates the local society from the outside world is attributed to the agency of foreign visitors.

Stone walls and enclosures (*lutur*) are common throughout southeastern Maluku. Wuri Handoko (2016: 169) points out that early colonial forts or mosques might have been a model for these structures in Ujir, even if their meaning and purpose remained ambiguous. The stone fortress associated with colonial military bases and trading sites was a defensible, bounded space that allowed displays of power and the concentration of valuable things. In contemporary Banda Eli, however, people give *lutur* a social and spiritual significance. To people of the lower class, the ancient stone structure called Lutur Lekes on the hill above the village signified the centre of a multi-clan community which occupied the site before the Banda immigrants founded the currently existing village on the shore.

To Muslims and non-Muslims, the long-distance networks of Muslim traders suggested that individuals who embodied Islam had access to external social forces and controlled their entry into the local world. For such people, Islam was a sign of cosmological mobility that helped them navigate in and out of local social orders even as they identified themselves with the regional commercial class (Friedman 1994: 33). For this reason, Muslim settlements in southeast Maluku did not assimilate into their host society or remain enclaves of a distinct, immigrant population. Banda Eli is a clear example of a site that constitutes a boundary between the Kei islands society and the outside world, and this has attracted many people from the surrounding Kei villages to join it over time.

During my fieldwork in the 1990s, Banda Eli was a populous village with some 2,200 inhabitants who lived along a thin, coastal strip on the eastern shore of Great Kei. This is a remarkable concentration of people compared to nearby Kei villages, none of which had more than 700 inhabitants at the time. The large population of Banda Eli is explained by the trickle of Kei people who have joined it from other villages, become Muslims, and begun to speak Banda. As many as half of Banda Eli people – including

the majority in the large satellite village of Efruan – belong to the autochthonous class. While the autochthonous commoners today reject the traditional class hierarchy, most continue to accept spiritual leadership by the imams of the village's several mosques, all of whom (except for the imam of the 'rebel' hamlet of Ui) descend from Banda immigrants.

The complexity of Banda Eli and similar Muslim societies has not resulted in a syncretic mix of Islam and local spirit cults. Islam and the ritual domain that involves communicating with local spirits are demarcated by the social boundary between their main practitioners: Banda immigrants and ritual specialists called *sewa* who derive from the autochthonous class. The fact that Islamic rituals follow a calendar that is independent on the seasons that regulate trade, food production, and national holidays helps keep these domains apart because their periods of intensity do not coincide in a systematic manner. It is true that Muslims observe the Kei post-partum rituals that last 40 days from birth (Kaartinen 2007: 74), but after this process of social birth, children become part of Islamic life-cycle rituals that are also observed at death.

Banda Eli is an example of social formations that have succeeded in stabilising the boundaries between different types of authority, society and the external world, and the ritual and religious domain. In Kei, such formations are not exclusive to Muslim communities. Tanimbar-Evav, which resisted the influence of any world religions for an exceptionally long period, recognises the existence of the larger social order outside the wall that surrounds its internal processes of fertility and exchange. It is likely that such bounded sociocultural orders emerged from the long history of external trade. However, particularly in the Kei islands, it appears that early encounters with Islam gave their boundaries a specific meaning. Personhood in the Kei society involves a sense of lasting debt, which arises when a woman gets married and has children and involves the entire families of both spouses. Part of the attraction of Islam is that it gives meaning to individual human life outside this symbolic framework. This makes it possible for people to imagine other kinds of identity and belonging, for instance in the context of long-distance trade.

Islamic presence in southeast Maluku is not limited to highly differentiated local societies and the identities they generate. It is also part of the symbolic significance that people associate with specific places in folk narratives and migration myths. Narratives

are 'topogenic' when their verbal references to geographic place suggest the existence of a body of knowledge that can be recovered by visiting or talking about a particular place (Fox 2006: 13). Thus, people of Banda Eli use the name Fokorndan, 'mountain of Banda', when they talk about their ancestral homeland. It is not imagined in terms of maritime geography, but by naming the topographic features one will immediately recognise when actually there.

In 2017, a Banda friend accompanied me to Labetakka village, the home of his ancestor who was one of the Muslim saints identified as the Four Kings of Banda (Leupe 1855: 79). The most sacred site of Labetakka is a rock enclosed in a smokehouse that the current inhabitants of the village use for curing nutmeg. The offerings surrounding the rock indicate it is the object of similar visits that people in Indonesia perform at the graves of saints. This rock, however, is not a gravesite but a sign of the absence of the former inhabitants of the village. It is said to have bulged up from the earth after the original Banda people left the island. Outside the village on a hill are a number of sites identified with their ancestor, Boisili Lawataka. The well at which he took his ablutions, the mosque in which he prayed, and the seat in which he rested watching the sea, are all represented by a small, peaceful garden of rocks. On leaving each of these sites, my friend touched the stone with a hand to bid it farewell and instructed me to do the same. The objects at each site were treated as personal beings because each was a metonym of the founding ancestor. I was also told that the entire island of Banda Neira is his body, and its northern cape – the site of Labetakka – represents his head.

The rock protruding from the earth is obviously a sign of the energies of the soil which become connected to the charisma of the Muslim ancestor as one walks through the ancestral landscape. The connection is achieved through a poetics of space that allows the visitor to stand in the footsteps of the ancestor and occupy his position in the Islamic world. As Gibson (2007: 83) points out, the graves of Islamic saints are the source of blessings for those who visit them in a practice called *siara*; similarly, the heirlooms left behind by saints serve as points of access to a divine realm in which ordinary constraints of time, space, and social hierarchy are suspended. The present case highlights the way in which Islamic presence can be stabilised through figurative, world-making actions grounded in particular objects, places, and landscapes – whether

or not these are contained in the kind of differentiated social community described earlier.

The examples discussed in this section suggest that Islam had a pivotal role in various attempts to stabilise the asymmetrical relationship between the foreign traders and indigenous peoples of southeast Maluku. It has been incorporated in local realities in the form of social boundary, as in Banda Eli, or as a material wall that signifies the existence of local culture, as happened in Tanimbar-Evav. The poetics of space, exemplified by the visit to the ancestral landscape in Banda Neira, has a different but related stabilising effect. Through narrative discourse around graves, monuments, and ancestral sites, Islam is anchored firmly in the ancestral landscape, and the concrete features and spatial orientations of this landscape make it possible to assume the perspective of former generations. In this way, Islam is incorporated in the founding events of social life, in the same way as certain origin myths in Maluku point to the material traces of ancestral actions as a sign of their truth.

## Late colonial transformations

The focus of the previous section has been on the structuring and stabilising effects of Islam in those areas which, in the early colonial period, remained outside effective colonial control. The era in which state power was practically absent from southeast Maluku came to an end in the late 19th century because of two developments. In mid-century, steamship transport and the liberal economic policies of the colonial state made southeast Maluku accessible to new forms of commerce, undermining the traditional institutions and boundaries that formerly limited the access of outsiders to the local society. The 1880s marked the start of Christian missions that had not been attempted since Vertrecht's visit more than two centuries earlier. Both developments had the most dramatic effect in the Kei islands. External trade in Kei had been controlled by chiefly domains, but ironwood trade required ships to land close to logging sites, and conflicting claims to these sites fragmented the political structure of each domain. Another issue faced by the colonial government was how to reconcile a substantial number of Catholic missionaries with the presence of Muslims in Kei. The eventual

solution to both issues was a new mode of territoriality that redefined the boundaries of the indigenous society and divided it into Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim villages or hamlets.

After his visit to the Kei islands in 1887, Baron van Hoëvell (1890) – a Protestant and a high-ranking colonial official – recommended allowing Christian missions to work in the Kei islands. As a result of his suggestion, the following year a Catholic mission started in Langgur, a village in Lesser Kei. While van Hoëvell made his proposal out of concern that the people of Kei would otherwise convert to Islam, there were in fact relatively few Muslim converts outside the two Banda villages in Great Kei. During the ironwood boom that started somewhere in the 1850s, the rajas of Dullah and Tual – the principal ports of Small Kei – converted to Islam in order to strengthen their ties to visiting Arab traders (Eijbergen 1866b: 268). This is still consistent with the pattern in which conversion was motivated by the cosmopolitan mobility of elites, and not evidence of proselytising activity by Muslims.

A census from 1906 shows that the population of Banda Elat and Banda Eli included a total of 1,679 Muslims – more than half of the 3,229 Muslims in the Great Kei island – whereas the Lesser Kei archipelago in the west had a total of 496 Muslims (Schreurs 1992: 131). In the report by van Hoëvell (1890: 119), there had been no Muslims or Christians among the Kei population in 1866, excluding the two Banda villages. This statement probably ignores smaller Muslim sites, such as the settlement of Bugis and Makassar immigrants in the village of Fer in southern Great Kei (Geurtjens 1921: 17).

Starting from 1895, the number of Catholics began to increase rapidly through mass conversions by entire villages (Laksono 2002: 162). The mission strategy was to train children from the local aristocratic class in order to provide a role model for the followers of their family (Derksen 2016: 119). Banda Elat – one of the Banda villages in Great Kei – became a multi-religious site after a Catholic mission was built near its harbour in 1910. Although the Catholic mission only had a minor head start over the Protestant one in Great Kei, its appeal to the upper class soon gave it a foothold in several important villages.

While there are no reliable figures on the Muslim population of Kei in the 1890s, it appears that Islam did not spread in response to Muslim proselytisation, but because Kei

people began to see religion as a new kind of collective identity. By 1933, around 11,000 out of the 50,000 inhabitants of Kei were Muslims (Scheffer 1933: 24). The overall impression of this period is that Christianity and Islam developed in tandem, as people learned to perceive the change in their society in religious terms. Some leading Kei clans (*fam*) had it both ways and made a joint decision to split into Muslim and Protestant branches, both of which used the old clan name in reference to their high rank in the local society.

By the early 20th century, the conversion of elite families and their villages had established the spatial and social boundaries for three kinds of religious identity: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. This division is visible in the alternating rows of churches and mosques that mark the coastal landscapes of Kei. Religion itself did not determine the boundaries of the wider community. In many villages, particularly in Great Kei, the division between Catholics and Protestants coincides between the aristocratic and autochthonous class. These classes depend on each other's recognition for land and resource rights, and each has a stake in shared village territory.

The missionary era in Kei gave rise to religion (*agama*) as a general concept for scripturalist world religions. One impulse for this process was van Hoëvell's hostility towards Islam, which the colonial administration saw as a potential source of anti-colonial rebellion. This suspicion was due to the fact that steamship transport had made the pilgrimage of Mecca accessible to Muslims in the Dutch East Indies. In the view of van Hoëvell and his contemporaries, this meant that it was no longer safe to regard Islamic practices as an element of local culture. For the Orientalist mindset of the time, it also implied a need to understand Islam as a scriptural religion and to influence how it was being taught to the natives. The significance of the evolving Islamic Orthodoxy, and its relationship to older Islamic traditions, is discussed in the next section.

**Forms of Islamic knowledge**

I have argued that such places as Banda Eli used to be boundaries or entry points to the local society. For the Banda migrants looking for a new home, the elevated land that marked the domain of ancestral tombs, local spirits, and sources of fertility was a

complementary part of the desired Islamic landscape. The Banda oral tradition recounts how the ancestors travelled on in search of an island that had a mountain, as if to reproduce the landscape they had left behind. They also sought to make their mosque an integral element of this landscape by involving autochthonous people in its construction. In the 1990s, several autochthonous groups still claimed the right to make specific parts of the central mosque of Banda Eli when it was being rebuilt.

These observations suggest that the Islam practised by the Banda is strongly embedded in the local society and the lived environment. This, however, does not mean that it represents a mindset that is closed to modern doctrinal discourses. From observing the celebrations of Islamic holidays, or the literature, devotional objects, and relics left by past generations, one gets the impression that what people themselves identify as their 'Islamic culture' actually consists of several forms of cosmopolitan Islam, each of which has stood for 'modernity' at some point in time. The question of authenticity only arises when some layer has been objectified as 'culture' or 'heritage', but not as long as it is perceived as a meaningful way to engage the world.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is an obvious example of such cosmopolitan practices. The first haji from Banda Eli known by name probably made his voyage before 1900, and subsequent pilgrimages took place in 1908 and 1917. It is unclear whether the pilgrims of this time had first-hand contact with Indonesian Muslim scholars residing in Mecca (Laffan 2011: 135–136), but in any case the pilgrims had access to their printed works and brought some back to the village. One example is Arshad al-Banjari's *Sabil al-Muhtadin* ('The path for those who wish to be guided'), acquired by Haji Abdul Rosinggin from Ta'if in 1917. This Malay book appeared in 1859, printed in one of the lithographic presses that replaced handwritten manuscripts as the main method of disseminating Islamic works in Southeast Asia in the 1840s (Laffan 2011: 55). The presence of this book in Banda Eli demonstrates that Kei islands' Muslims participated in 'print modernity', an Islamic public sphere centred on Sumatran and Javanese scholars who resided in Mecca and Cairo and exposed Malay-speaking pilgrims to contemporary Islamic thought (Laffan 2011: 52). While it is unclear if Haji Abdul acquired the book in the Hijaz or along his voyage there, it was certainly part of the

curriculum of Islamic education followed by Indonesia's *pesantren*[1] schools in the 19th century, and a subject of the debates that Christiaan Snouck-Hurgronje (2014: 263) reported hearing among Indonesian pilgrims to Mecca in 1884–1885.

Few Banda have a working knowledge of Arabic, but Islamic literacy – the ability to recite the Qur'an and to read Malay texts written in Arabic letters ( Jawi script) – was taught systematically to teenagers when I lived in Banda Eli in the 1990s. When people described to me the hajis who had passed away, their literacy and deep knowledge of Islam was often the first thing mentioned about them. Involvement with the print modernity of the late 19th and early 20th centuries thus appears as an aspect of personal reputation that is distinct from the position of patriarchal figures in their own society.

Another cosmopolitan feature of Banda Eli Islamic practice is its connection to Sufism. Michael Laffan (2011) has recently challenged the former, monolithic view of Sufism as the main vector of Islamisation in Indonesia. Laffan argues that the surveillance and promotion of Islamic education by colonial authorities resulted in a convergence between several Sufi paths (*tarekat*) and the Orientalist understanding of proper Islamic doctrine and practice. This educational tradition underlies what is known as Islamic Orthodoxy in Indonesia, and its 'modern' as well as 'traditional' aspects are both present among the Banda. The practice of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God, usually led by returned hajis and members of the lineages with a claim to the office of imam, gives a distinctly Sufi character to life-cycle rituals and mortuary feasts. The presence of Sufism is also indicated by *samrah*, a male dance accompanied by drums, and the singing of Berzanji, the tradition of the Prophet's birth, by women.

Islamic Orthodoxy is not merely an endorsement of particular devotional traditions and legal practices. It is also a context for claiming religious authority by taking a position over specific points of Muslim practice. Sufi *tarekat* have taken different views on how to determine the end of the fasting month: by actually sighting the crescent of the new moon, or through the astronomical calculation of the right date. In order to facilitate the celebration of Id'ul Fitri nationally, the sighting of the crescent by competent religious authorities (ulama) is broadcast to the public. But local religious leaders can take a

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[1] Islamic boarding schools.

similar role in declaring the holiday. A former village head who had also served as imam in one of the mosques in Banda Eli explained to me in 1995 that he was prepared to delay the end of fasting until he saw the crescent himself, even if people in other parts of the village would follow the date announced by national religious authorities.

The position taken by this old man is one that Laffan (2011: 62) links to the Shattariyya, a *tarekat* that stressed personal religious insight as against the universalising attitude towards Islamic rules promoted by its Naqsbandiyya critics. The Islamic orthodoxy that was stabilising in late 19th century East Indies was influenced by the teaching of both Naqsbandiyya and Shattariyya sheikhs placed in Mecca. This stabilisation was partly a result of colonial efforts to standardise religious education. In their attempt to manage the potential threat that Islamic movements posed to the colonial state, the Netherlands East Indies government and its Orientalist advisors made a distinction between culturally inflected Islamic practice and an orthodox, scripturalist understanding of Islam as religion (Johns 1987: 205). In the 1880s, Snouck-Hurgronje took distance from this view in favour of the ethnographic study of competing Sufi orientations and scholars. One should not exaggerate the remoteness of Muslim communities such as Banda Eli by ignoring the effects of the colonial objectification of Islam. Pilgrimages, metropolitan visits, and contacts with Javanese, Makassar, and Arab traders meant that some of the same debates over proper Islamic practice went on in Java, Sumatra, and in the Muslim communities of Maluku.

A third framework that links local understandings of Islam with region-wide discourses is the tradition about Sunan Rat At, the 'four saintly kings' who lived in ancestral Banda. According to one narrative told in Banda Eli, the four kings were converted after a visit by Abubakar, one of Prophet Muhammed's Companions, who left them his prayer gown. One by one they covered themselves with it while sleeping and received a vision of the light of God. In another version, the four kings made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and one of them became the imam when Abubakar spat in his mouth.

The discourse of Islamic saints was certainly present in 17th-century Maluku, attested by the letters sent to Hitu, the Javanese Muslim village on the north coast of Ambon, from the successors of Sunan Gresik, one of the Walisongo or 'Nine Saints' of Java (Schrieke 1955: 34). This makes it likely that the account of the Banda about the Islamic conversion of their ancestral kings draws from literary models and folk

narratives about the origin of Islam that were in broad circulation before their migration to Kei. By some accounts, Islam was brought by specially initiated teachers or sheikhs traveling along the trade routes between the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia. Alternatively, the light of prophesy might fall first on a local ruler who later sought validation for his conversion from an itinerant holy man (Laffan 2011: 5). This narrative tradition has great political importance in Banda Eli where the offices of Orangkaya, Ratu, Imam, and Wali – the titles of the Four Kings – are passed on in different chiefly families. But similar narratives are also known in the Banda islands, and there were some efforts to record them in literary form as early as in the 1920s (Ronkel: 1945). Around the same time, people in the villages of east Seram sought information about their affiliation to the society of ancient Banda which was later recorded in typed documents (Ellen 2003: 85). It is quite possible that the people of Banda Eli, who travelled regularly to Central Maluku, participated in this ethno-historical debate of highly literate people about the role of their ancestors in the history of Islam.

In the modern notion, religions draw their universal validity from scripture. The Banda have clearly embraced this idea for at least a century or longer. At the same time, they have not given up insisting that Islam is deeply embedded in their own society. In this framework, Islam is a source of charismatic authority that revitalises the mosques, graves, and ritual offices of the village. The Muslim pilgrimage is consistent with both frameworks which explains why it is still accompanied by collective cultural practices such as the public sacrifice of a goat in the village square, a visit to ancestral graves, and a memorial meal served in the pilgrim's house.


**Conclusion**


The social intensity created by trade seasons and resource booms, as well as the displacing effects that they have on their social life, are part of the historical experience of people across Maluku. I have argued that Islam was one of the ideological frameworks that has given a specific meaning to the presence of visiting foreigners and immigrants among autochthonous peoples. In the non-state space of historical southeast Maluku, Islam had a significant role in structuring the interactions between local people and outsiders, as well as defining the social and cultural boundaries between the two.

The stability of these boundaries should not be exaggerated. In rare cases, such as the Banda community where I have done fieldwork, Islam became part of a complex society with an Austronesian social structure and cosmology. In other places, local people appropriated Islamic symbols and objects and used them to represent their society as a bounded entity. In both contexts, we might think of Islam as a resource for various performative actions through which people objectified the difference between 'local' and 'foreign' that was actualised in their seasonal interactions with visiting long-distance traders.

There is thus a connection with the early presence of Islam and the awareness of 'local culture' – an object of knowledge that reflects the asymmetry of power that arise from exploitative trade, colonial rule, and modern state policies towards indigenous and marginal people. It was only in the late 19th century, however, that local societies in peripheral Maluku started to be defined in a uniform way in the interest of governing them. This commensurability was based on the category of 'religion' that arose in the era of Christian missions. While the representation of Islam as a religion had profound consequences in spreading it among large segments of the Kei island society, Islam remained embedded in cultural practices and material forms in a different way than Christianity (Catholic and Protestant). For this reason, the boundaries between Islam and culture remains ambiguous; many, seemingly local aspects of Islam are actually derived from cosmopolitan experience and discourse.

'Cultural Islam' is often used as a shorthand for Islamic traditions that do not contest the secular power of the colonial or national state. On closer inspection, such traditions have been shaped by struggles over values, authority, and knowledge. In spite of its vast distance from the nearest centralised polities, early colonial southeast Maluku was a political space defined by trade. Leonard Andaya (1993: 23) seems to be saying the same as he describes Maluku as a 'cultural state', defined by a shared cosmology that gives legitimacy to its political leaders. While this model captures something essential about the social complexity found in certain southeast Maluku societies, it does not consider the instability that economic conjunctures, commodity booms and busts, and distant political events inevitably cause in a long-distance trading system. The area I have discussed is an inherently unstable space (Spyer 1998), and what happens around

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the boundaries of everyday social life is at least as important as what happens in the centre.

**Note on contributor**

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