

'Persians and Shi'ites in Thailand: From the Ayutthaya Period to the Present'

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This writer delivered a public lecture upon invitation by the renowned Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore.

In recent years, Thailand – as well as other Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia, where to date there are said to live more than 100,000 Iranians in its capital Kuala Lumpur alone – has become a popular destination for Iranians. As a matter of fact, Iranian migration to what is now Thailand began as early as the seventeenth century, during the Ayutthaya period when the kingdom hosted a large colony of Iranian merchants. Some of their descendants converted to Buddhism and continued to retain influence in Thai public life to the present day; one prominent example is the Bunnag family, whose ancestor 'Shaykh Ahmad' is said to have come from Qom and arrived at Ayutthaya in 1602.

A cohesive, comprehensive, and chronological account of the Persian cultural presence in Southeast Asia is difficult, if not impossible, to present owing to the diverse and multifaceted nature of the Southeast Asian communities. Persian influences are particularly discernible in the vocabulary of the two dominant languages of the Southeast Asian region, i.e., Malay (the *lingua franca* of the Muslims in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago), and Thai or Siamese (from the sixteenth century and the Ayutthaya period onwards). Iran's cultural and trade relations with Southeast Asia date far back into the pre-Islamic period. However, official diplomatic relations between the two regions, exemplified by the exchange of non-permanent missions rather than by permanent extraterritorial embassies, become traceable only during the Safavid period (1501-1722).

This writer's lecture – supported by a PowerPoint presentation – focused on the main features of the Persian cultural presence in Thailand from the Ayutthaya period up to the present, based on his extensive field research and publications in the course of the last decade.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Christoph Marcinkowski, "Persian Religious and Cultural Influences in Siam/Thailand and Maritime Southeast Asia: A Plea for a Concerted Interdisciplinary Approach," *Journal of the Siam Society* 88, pt. 1-2 (2000), 186-94; idem, "The Iranian-Siamese Connection: An Iranian Community in the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya," *Iranian Studies* 35, nos. 1-3 (Winter-Summer 2002), 23-46; idem, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya: Contacts between Iran and Siam in the 17th Century*, with a foreword by Professor Ehsan Yarshater, Columbia University, New York

(Singapore: PN, 2003); idem, "The Iranian Presence in the Indian Ocean Rim: A Report on a 17th-Century Safavid Embassy to Siam (Thailand)," *Islamic Culture* 77, no. 2 (2003), 57-98; idem, "Iranians, *Shaykh al-Islams* and *Chularajmontris*: Genesis and Development of an Institution and its Introduction to Siam," *Journal of Asian History* 37, no. 2 (2003), 59-76; and idem, "'Holier than Thou': Buddhism and the Thai People in Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's 17th-Century Travel Account *Safineh-yi Sulaymani*," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Germany), vol. 156, no. 2 (2006): 407-419. See also various relevant entries by this writer in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/>

**'Second International Conference on Islam and Higher Education:
The Empowerment of Muslim
Communities in Private Higher Education'**

(Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia, 14-16 November 2011)

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For a civilisation that rests squarely on knowledge, the primacy of education throughout the Islamic world is given its due throughout history chiefly by private individuals and groups. Notwithstanding state patronage of scholarship, the bulk of literature is often produced by independent scholars. But this historical reality came under serious challenge with the advent of the modern expansionist state, whose centrality in the public sphere gave birth to its dialectical Other, the private sector. Responding to this challenge, IAIS Malaysia organised the Second International Conference on Islam and Higher Education in collaboration with the Yayasan Pahang (Pahang State Foundation), IKIP International College, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) East Asia and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). The theme of the conference, "Empowering Muslim Communities in Private Higher Education", was carefully worded to reflect at once many different concerns – knowledge as a means of empowerment, education realised at the collective level (in communities) and the movement into the private sector, especially in higher education (sometimes called tertiary education). The theme is also indicative of a negotiation with prevailing realities, for concepts like public-private dichotomy, higher education and so on are but innovative ideas grafted onto the body of traditional discourse bearing distinctive assumptions that are themselves unique to contemporary experiences. Collectively taken they justify the need for such a conference as a follow-up from a similar initiative the previous year.

The keynote address was delivered by His Excellency Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), while the official closing speech was by the Menteri Besar of Pahang, YAB Dato' Seri diRaja