

# Reports

## Sailing the waves of convergence: cultural links and continuities across the Bay of Bengal

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AMIDST THE GLOBAL DECLINE OF AREA STUDIES, the Bay of Bengal is booming. The past decade has seen numerous monographs, seminars and conferences devoted to this part of Asia, often with titles containing the words ‘crossing’, ‘transcending’, ‘crossroads’ or ‘passageways’. Indeed, in order to make sense of the past and present of this vibrant part of the world – encompassing Asia’s two largest democracies and a range of states long thought of as ‘problematic’, yet currently lifted by the optimism of economic development and democratization – it has proven essential to cross the boundaries of nation-states as well as academic disciplines.

The one-day symposium *Sailing the Waves of Convergence* was another modest step in this direction. This event served as an opportunity for a group of predominantly early-career scholars to present their research on transnational networks and cultural contact across the Bay of Bengal, foregrounding agents that have largely remained outside the European gaze and, therefore, outside the canon of conventional historiography. With a slight predilection to pre-modern and early modern times, the participants shared a refreshing mix of perspectives on the dispersal of religions, ideologies, artefacts, language and literature and their genealogies to better documented times. Presenters covered a wide range of geographical and disciplinary backgrounds, yet were connected by a shared desire to bring focus to the full range of human activities connecting the shores, harbours and riversides of South and Southeast Asia.

Below: An Islamic manuscript partly in Tamil and partly in Malay (Leiden University Library)

### Transnational connections explored

Introducing pre-modern religious contacts, Munzir Hitami and Siti Aisyah (UIN SUSKA Riau) examined the oldest known Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) of the Malay World. This manuscript – written on late 16th century European paper and kept at the Cambridge University Library – contains a Malay commentary on the *Sūrat al-Kahf*. The text displays some Sūfī influence. The Dutch merchant Pieter Willemsz van Elbinck has been identified as the copyist, but a closer analysis of the handwriting contradicts this theory. Although its original author remains unknown, the work must be considered the earliest documented effort to introduce Qur’anic exegesis to a Malay readership. Subsequently, pre-Islamic networks of religious and cultural exchange were highlighted by Natalie Ong (National University of Singapore). Focusing on the temple reliefs of the Borobudur and Prambanan, she offered a reconstruction of daily life in pre-colonial Java through an iconographic analysis. The localized narratives from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Lalitavistara* contain detailed depictions of sartorial styles, enabling an informed identification of different social ranks and political hierarchies through a comparative study of attire, ornaments, archaeological and textual insights.

The sites of Hindu-Buddhist grandeur retained their relevance in colonial and post-colonial times. Marieke Bloembergen (KITLV) situated Java’s past within the larger framework of Greater India, an ‘imagined geography’ of spiritual enlightenment. The island’s pre-Islamic heritage was contextualized in different ways by members of the Theosophical Society, Indonesian elites, Buddhist revivalists, and advocates of pan-Asianism, all entitled to competing notions of regionalism, spirituality, knowledge, and the role of the museum. Yet the discourse on classical antiquity was equally shaped by moving objects, in some cases across the length and breadth of the Bay of Bengal. Sraman Mukherjee (Nalanda University) illustrated this point by calling attention to the early 20th century excavation of Buddhist relics at the ruins of Shāh-jī-kī-Dherī on the outskirts of Peshawar. Among the findings was a casket containing bones associated with Buddha Śākyamuni. These bone remains were transferred across various sites and eventually ended up in a pagoda in the city of Mandalay, where they were entrusted to the Burmese Buddhist community on the eastern frontier of British India.

For more than two millennia, the interethnic networks that took shape across the Bay of Bengal fuelled cross-fertilization of the spoken and written word. Tom Hoogervorst (KITLV) provided a scholarly overview of language contact between India, Sri Lanka and the Malay World, also calling attention to examples of Southeast Asian influence that spread westward. The poorly documented vernacular languages and literatures of South and Southeast Asia contain valuable new clues to the nature of interethnic contact and everyday life. This was substantiated by Siti Aisyah (UIN SUSKA Riau), who approached Islamic connections of the early 20th-century through the lens of a recently discovered manuscript. The story of this quadrilingual word-list (Arabic, Malay, Urdu and Tamil) reaches far beyond the area of Kampar, where it was found, and provides a vista into the religious, commercial and cosmological ideas of its compiler. This isolated instantiation of multilingualism must be situated within the wider context of scholarly networks. The distribution of Arabic-derived writing systems across the Indian Ocean World corroborates the interconnectedness of its languages and literatures in pre- and early modern times. In exploring this issue further, Abdur Rahoof Ottathingal (Leiden University) traced the development of several vernacular writing styles and called attention to a set of shared local innovations specific to South India and Southeast Asia.

In many cases, philological approaches are the only way to obtain an informed picture of cultural history and interethnic contact between non-European societies. Maria Packman (UC Berkeley) demonstrated this through a compelling case study on the widespread Islamic tale of the wedding between ‘Alī and Fāṭima, the daughter of Muḥammad. The Tamil version of this story displays numerous instances of localization, including the adoption of several Hindu elements. Many other similarities surface upon comparing this version with its Malay equivalent. Both exhibit a number of Shī’ī characteristics, revealing a diverse Islamic landscape in early modern times that was largely erased by more recent developments. A similar point was made with regard to Islamic legal traditions across the Bay of Bengal. Mahmood Kooria (Leiden University) took issue with the Middle East-centric notion of a monolithic legalist picture, problematizing the historical dominance

of the Shāfi’ī school in this part of the world. Instead, he underscored the role of Ḥanafism and Shī’ism in 16th century Indonesia, revealing a peaceful coexistence of legal schools in the pre-modern Indian Ocean rim.

### Studying the Bay of Bengal

Cumulatively, the presentations and the ensuing discussion demonstrated the strength of bringing together researchers from different backgrounds to address the shared histories of South and Southeast Asia. One of the main intellectual challenges of examining so culturally diverse a region is to talk *with* each other, not *past* each other, and produce research that appeals to scholars across nation-states and in a wide range of disciplines, each entitled to their own conventions and interpretations of such key concepts as ‘culture’, ‘transnational connections’, ‘networks’, ‘directionality’, and ‘power dynamics’. In-depth cultural knowledge – a skill quickly disappearing from the toolkit of area studies – is often the only way to access perspectives other than those left to us by the European colonial project and post-independence nation-states. In the absence of written records, clues to the history of daily life can be found in the rites of religions, the reliefs and relics of temples, and the vocabulary of languages. Linguists, philologists, archaeologists, art historians, and religious studies scholars could therefore be more vocal in ensuring that cultural and region-specific perspectives are not overlooked inside the cockpit of ‘big history’. In addition, we need the insights of maritime historians and archaeologists to sharpen our picture of the aquatic dimensions of the Bay of Bengal, including the very ships aboard which the foundations of interethnic contact were laid. The latter challenge was not met by this symposium, but ample opportunities remain in the future.

Several participants underlined the importance of looking at the oft-neglected communities on the lower rungs of power structures. Non-state agents in particular – be they geographically mobile scholars, semi-sedentary coastal populations, or labour migrants – impacted profoundly on the transnational history of the Bay of Bengal, yet their importance is not always clearly articulated in the wider literature. Furthermore, the presentations on Islamic connections between South and Southeast Asia revealed a more prominent place of Shī’ism, Sūfism and non-Shāfi’ī legal schools in the religious landscapes of the region. Equally vital were the roles played by a diverse range of Hindu and Buddhist communities. Against the backdrop of reactionary Hindu nationalism in India and Sunnī reformation movements in the Malay World, this diversity is in danger of becoming eclipsed in historiographies that suit the narratives of present-day political elites.

The issue of mobility, too, was questioned from a variety of angles. Bearing in mind cheap airfare and globalization, but also passports and immigration detention, we asked ourselves whether the Bay of Bengal is more interconnected now than it has been historically. If yes, how does this translate into academic interconnectedness? South and Southeast Asia share palpable cultural and historical roots, yet scholars from either region – with some notable exceptions – have been reticent to study this legacy institutionally, collaboratively, and on equal footing. As a result, much historical scholarship on the Bay of Bengal is yet to move beyond a long-established focus on Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia and re-imaginings of Greater India. Both themes, useful as they are, inadvertently perpetuate the colonial narrative in which Southeast Asia was “civilized” from India in a unidirectional fashion, leaving its indigenous peoples marginalized from their own past.

Upon moving away – as many scholars are – from the conventionally demarcated spaces of South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, are we not awkwardly trying to create a new area? If the Bay of Bengal is to be seen as a conceptually meaningful region, who determines its research agenda and where are the ‘archives’ of its researchers? Can Leiden, in the light of its monumental library collections and long-standing pedigree in the study of Asia, play a prominent role in addressing these issues? Its department of South and Southeast Asian Studies is undeniably born out of pragmatic downsizing, yet this ‘new region’ is hardly a cartographic convenience. People, commodities, and ideas have travelled back and forth along the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean with a remarkable degree of historical continuity. These linkages continue to inform notions of cultural identification and national belonging in one of the most heavily populated parts of the world. Exciting further opportunities for innovative research await.

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