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A long journey of Admiral Cheng Ho and the acculturation of Islam and Chinese in Indonesia

Approximately twenty years before Admiral Cheng Ho set foot on the ground in the archipelago (Indonesia), Walisongo or known as Islamic clerics has done the propaganda of the first generation of Islam in several regions in Indonesia. The qualified preachers came from Turkey, Samarkand, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, and Persia (Iran). Caliph Muhammad I of the Ottoman Caliphate was the organizer of this Walisongo journey to the Southeast Asia, particularly to Indonesia. It was then divided into five stages of Dak'wah period and these clerics who were descendant of the “Alawiyin” from Hadramaut in Yemen later became a role model in Indonesia. Most of Indigenous people think that most of them were originally from local area and called them as Kyai or Cleric giving to them local names and speaking in Javanese. At that time, the acculturation process also occurred by way of trade and marriage with the locals.

The first cleric even came from Persia (Iran) in the middle of 12th century AD. This was noted by the inscription of the first Islamic kingdom in Indonesia called PASE or Pasai in Aceh, Northern Sumatra which derived from the word Persian or Farsi. Adding the fact, Indonesian Muslim society is very respectful to Sayyid or Habib, the descendant of Hasan and Husen son of Ali bin Abi Talib.
In the 15th century during Ming Dynasty (1368-1643) Chinese people of Yunnan began arriving to spread Islam, particularly in Java. Admiral Cheng Ho (Admiral Zhang Hee) or better known as Sam Poo Kong or Pompu Awang in 1410 and in 1416 had led the fleet landing on the beach Simongan or known as Semarang in Central Java. In addition, he was also a messenger of the Emperor Yung Lo to visit the King of Majapahit which also aims to spread Islam.

Who is Admiral Cheng Ho then? Why he is so important for Asian and why are they also proud to talk about him and especially to the Indonesian where people had built some noted holy buildings to give homage to this down to earth admiral like those called Sam Po Kong; a Chinese temple in Semarang Central Java which was built to commemorate Cheng Ho’s voyage to Java that is still visited by travelers from various regions and countries, Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya East Java, and Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Palembang of South Sumatra.

Among the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia, Cheng became the object of cult veneration, even some of his crew members who happened to stay in this or that port sometimes did as well, such as "Poontaokong" on Sulu. The temples of this cult – called after either of his names, Cheng Hoon or Sam Po – are peculiar to overseas Chinese except for a single temple in Hongjian originally constructed by a returned Filipino Chinese in the Ming dynasty and rebuilt by another Filipino Chinese after the original was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The same village of Hongjian, in Fujian's Jiaomei township, is also the ancestral home of Corazon Aquino.

During my visit to Malacca in 1992, I accidentally visited Cheng Hoon Teng temple built in the 17th century and was marked by a mini statue of Admiral Cheng Ho in the front courtyard of the temple which is never empty by its visitors. When I looked at the statue, I suddenly feel the cold breeze of South China Sea and the attendance of mysterious personage of Cheng Ho who was castrated by General Fu Youde when he was still 10 due to his brave resistance. This temple is the oldest and most important Chinese temple in Malacca, Malaysia.

Following Cheng's arrival, the Sultan and Sultana of Malacca visited China at the head of over 540 of their subjects, bearing ample tribute. Sultan Mansur Shah (1459–1477) later dispatched Tun Perpatih Putih as his envoy to China, carrying a letter from the Sultan to the Ming emperor. The letter requested the hand of an
imperial daughter in marriage. In 1459, a princess named Hang Li Po or Hang Liu was sent from China to marry the Sultan. The princess came with 500 high-ranking young men and a few hundred handmaidens as her entourage. They eventually settled in Bukit Cina or translated as Chinese Valley. It is believed that a significant number of them married into the local populace, creating the descendants now known as the Peranakan, which became later as the acculturation of Chinese Malay in Southeast Asia preference in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

Owing to this supposed lineage, the Peranakan still use special honorifics: Baba for the men and Nyonya for the women and in previous time, they used very tiny silk shoes for adult women that look like children size and that believed the more tiny feet the women have, the more show their identity as part of noble family’s member. Peranakan culture is very interesting to study because it is also the forerunner of the Indonesian traditional outfit (fashion).

In 1961, the Indonesian Islamic leader and scholar Hamka credited Cheng with an important role in the development of Islam in Indonesia. The Brunei Times credits Cheng building Chinese Muslim communities in Palembang and along the shores of Java, the Malay Peninsula, and the Philippines. These Muslims allegedly followed the Hanafi school in the Chinese language. This Chinese Muslim community was led by Hajji Yan Ying Yu, who urged his followers to assimilate and take local names. The Chinese trader Sun Long even supposedly adopted the son of the king of Majapahit, a son who went on to become Raden Patah, the founder of Islamic Kingdom in Java.

According to Babad Tanah Jawi (Javanese history) Raden Patah born in 1455 and was the son of the last king of Majapahit, Brawijaya and a Chinese concubine who was the daughter of a Chinese muslim preacher and merchant, Syeich Batong or Tan Go Hwat of Gresik, East Java. Brawijaya was forced to give his Chinese concubine called Siu Ban Ci to his eldest son, Arya Damar, regent of Palembang by the Queen. After delivered Raden Patah, this Chinese concubine married to Arya Damar and gave birth to Raden Kusen or Kin San because Queen Dwarawati empress from Campa feel jealous.
Cheng Hoo Mosque in Surabaya is a mosque which resembles a pagoda (houses of worship for Tri Dharma Buddhist) is predominantly in red, green, and yellow with thick ornaments inspired by the shade of the old Chinese Niu Jie Mosque in Beijing which was built in 996. The entry gate resembles the shape of a beautiful pagoda decorated with dragon and lion statues of wax with God name written in Arabic letters at the top of the Pagoda. This mosque was founded on the initiative of the Chinese Islamic elders and Islamic institutions in East Java. The development of the mosque was started on March 10, 2002 and was inaugurated on October 13, 2002.

Masjid Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Hoo Sriwijaya ib Palembang was built to honor the humble Admiral Cheng. Admiral Cheng is remembered not only for his success in trade and friendship, but also actively spreading Islam in the regions he visited.

Cheng He or well-known in Indonesia as Cheng Ho was born in 1371 by the name of Ma He, his parents came from a Hui tribe. Cheng was a second son in a family originally from Kunyang in Yunnan. Cheng has four sisters and one older brother.

Cheng Ho was a multi-talented man, besides as Hui court eunuch, Cheng also as a navigator, mariner, explorer, diplomat, and fleet admiral during the reign of emperor of Ming Dynasty in China. Young Cheng who was already trusted by the Chinese emperor to lead the expedition to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East, and East Africa during 1405 - 1433.

As a favorite of the Yongle Emperor, whose usurpation he assisted, he rose to the top of the imperial hierarchy and served as commander of the southern capital Nanjing (the capital was later moved to Beijing by Yongle). These voyages were long neglected in official Chinese histories but have become well-known in China and abroad since the publication of Liang Qichao's Biography of Our Homeland's Great Navigator, Zheng He in 1904.

Cheng was born from a Muslim family, however, his religious beliefs became all-embracing and eclectic in his adulthood. The Liujiagang and Changle inscriptions suggest that Cheng's devotion to Tianfei (the patron goddess of sailors and seafarers) was the dominant faith to which he adhered, reflecting the goddess' central role to the treasure fleet.
Apparently Cheng’s grandfather was a descendant of Sayyid Ajjal Shams al-Din Omar, a Persian who served in the administration of the Mongol Empire and was the Governor of Yunnan during the early Yuan Dynasty. His great great-grandfather was named Bayan and may have been stationed at a Mongol garrison in Yunnan. His grandfather carried the hajji title. His father had the surname Ma and the hajji title. The title suggests that they had made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the autumn of 1381 when a Ming army invaded and conquered Yunnan, Ma Hajji (Cheng’s father) died at age 39 as a casualty of the hostilities between the Ming armies and Mongol forces. Admiral Cheng had an epitaph engraved in honor of his father, which was composed by the Minister of Rites Li Zhigang. At the same province, Cheng was captured by the Ming army, when at that time General Fu Youde saw Cheng on a road and approached him in order to inquire about the location of the Mongol pretender. Cheng responded defiantly that he had jumped into a lake and afterwards, the general took him as prisoner, then the young Cheng was soon castrated before being placed in servitude of the Prince of Yan in 1385, a very tragic moment for a young Cheng.

Admiral Cheng started to travel to the archipelago which referred to Indonesia in 1424, his headed first to Palembang to confer an official seal and letter of appointment upon Shi Jisun, who was placed in the office of Pacification Commissioner. The TaizongShilu 27 February 1424 entry reports that Shi Jisun had sent QiuYancheng as envoy to petition the approval of the succession from his father Shi Jinqing, who was the Pacification Commissioner of Palembang, and was given permission from the Yongle Emperor.

On 7 September 1424, Zhu Gaozhi had inherited the throne as the Hongxi Emperor after the death of the Yongle Emperor on 12 August 1424. When Cheng returned from Palembang, he found that the Yongle Emperor had died during his absence. The ocean voyages were discontinued after Zhu Di’ son as the Hongxi Emperor and Cheng was appointed as Defender of Nanjing, the empire’s Southern capital and had a large responsible for the completion of the Porcelain Tower of Nanjing, an enormous Pagoda and described as a wonder of the world in the 19th century.

As for the city of Palembang in South Sumatra, the people have particular physical characteristic that are similar to the Chinese ethnic. The city is famous by the name of Pempek –a typical food in form of a fried cake made of fish and sago and eaten
with sour spicy sauce like those similar in China. Not far from downtown Palembang, located about 7 km from Ampera bridge the landmark of the city, we can visit Kemaro island.

The attraction in Kemaro island is a 9-storey pagoda towering in the middle of the island, built in 2006. In addition, there is also a Chinese temple Hok Tjing Rio or Soei Goeat Kiong temple, famous as Kuan Im temple built in 1962. A tomb of Tan Bun, Chinese prince who married to Siti Fatimah from Palembang can be seen near the pagoda. Their love story becomes a legend that is close to the formation of Kemaro’s island. There is also a Buddhist temple that is frequent visited by the Buddhist followers during the event of Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh, the celebration of 15 days after Chinese New Year and also as the completion of the lunar festival.

On 15 May 1426, the Xuande Emperor ordered the Directorate of Ceremonial to send a letter to Cheng to reprimand him for a transgression and later Xuande Emperor would eventually come to trust Cheng and the new Xuande Emperor pointed Cheng He to command over a seventh and final expedition into the "Western Ocean" (Indian Ocean). In 1431, Cheng was bestowed with the title "SanbaoTaijian".

One theory told that Admiral Cheng died in 1433. It may have happened during or shortly after the seventh voyage. Although, another theory wrote that Cheng He continued being the defender of Nanjing and ultimately dying in 1435. Cheng Ho adopted a son due to the castration by General Fu Youde when Cheng was still 10 years old.

In 1985, a Muslim-style tomb was built in Nanjing on the site of an earlier horseshoe-shape grave; it contains Cheng’s clothes and headgear as his body had been buried at sea.

Acculturation is a social process that occurs when a group of people with a particular culture facing with elements of a foreign culture and this foreign culture is gradually accepted and processed into its own culture without causing a loss of cultural elements of the group itself. Social process that had been conducted by Cheng Ho in Indonesia by way of pacific penetration, namely culture brought peacefully by other nation without any coercion was welcomed by local
community. Admiral Cheng Ho had managed well so that the Indonesian, especially in this century both Chinese and Chinese Muslim society together with their indigenous brothers accepts the process of acculturation as part of Indonesian culture heritage. Now days, there are many mix-marriage between the indigenous and the Chinese descendants and Indonesian culture becomes more colorful and the tolerance becomes bigger and stronger amongst the society.