Abbasid Decline and the Spread of Islamic Civilization to South and Southeast Asia

Of all of the factors that contributed to the spread of Islamic civilization in the millennium after the prophet Muhammad received his divine revelations in the early 7th century C.E., perhaps none was as crucial—yet neglected—as the rather modest sailing vessels that plied the waters of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Most commonly known as dhows (see Chapter 7, p. 175), but appearing in numerous variations with different names and found from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, these ships were probably first developed along the Nile River. Compared to the great junks of China, or even many of the less-imposing trading ships in the Indian Ocean in the classical age, dhows were rather small vessels. They normally had one or two masts and planked, wooden hulls that resembled modern yachts in shape, with pointed bows and square sterns (Figure 8.1). The dhows’ hull design contributed to their swiftness and maneuverability, but it was the configuration of their sails that have made them one of the most popular and enduring of the world’s ships for two millennia. Dhows were propelled by one or two large, triangular lateen sails that attached to the masts by long booms or yard arms, which extended diagonally high across both the fore and aft portions of the ship.

Although their relatively shallow hulls meant that dhows could not match junks or bulkier merchant ships in cargo capacity, their slender shape gave them a considerable advantage over most other ships in speed. Their triangular sails meant that they could tack against the wind, which was very difficult in the best of conditions for square-rigged ships. Most often, however, those who sailed dhows followed a seasonal pattern set by the direction of the monsoon winds that alternated between flows to the sea or land according to the time of the year in the Indian Ocean and adjacent waterways. Although galleys like those of classical Greece and Rome were widely used by Arabs in the Mediterranean, from Spain to China tens of thousands of dhows were the main carriers of Muslim commerce. And along with merchants and their trade goods, many of the same ships conveyed Sufis or Muslim holy men to regions as far-flung as India, Java and Malaysia, and the Philippine islands.

Seaworthy ships like the dhows were essential to the remarkable spread of the Islamic faith and the civilizations it gave rise to in this era. In contrast to the expansion of Muslim empires, which was largely carried out by Arab armies traveling over land, lasting mass conversions of conquered peoples to the religion of Islam were mainly due to the efforts of Sufis and other spiritual leaders. These missionaries of the Islamic faith traveled by caravan into central Asia and across the Sahara or traversed the seas in sturdy dhows. In either case, those who went out to win converts to Islam also disseminated broader products of Muslim culture. These included the Arabic language; advanced technologies, such as water pumps and windmills; Muslim science, law, and philosophy; and Islamic art and architecture.

Despite their speed and dexterity, dhows did not make great warships, either before or after gunpowder was introduced into sea warfare. They were too small to provide a suitable firing platform for regular cannon, and they could not carry enough soldiers to grapple, board, and overwhelm the crews of enemy ships. Like most of the ships that sailed the seas of the Middle East, east Africa, and Asia, dhows were built for trade and not war. Designs for that purpose served the peoples of the Indian Ocean and adjoining seas well until the last years of the 15th century. But with the arrival of well-armed Portuguese fleets after 1498, neither the dhows nor any of the ships in Asia west of the South China Sea could hold back expansionist Christian warriors and seafarers. These aspiring empire builders were eager to tap into the wealth, knowledge, and technological acumen of Islamic and Chinese culture zones far more advanced in most areas of human endeavor than their own.

Even as Muslim traders and Sufi holy men spread Islam across a great swath of Afro-Eurasia from north Africa to the Philippines in the east, the Abbasid empire was crumbling from within. In many of the areas newly won to the faith, rival dynasties arose to challenge Abbasid power. These new polities and the Abbasids themselves were in turn threatened by the invasions of nomadic peoples launched by successive waves of Turkish-speakers and the Mongols from central Asia as well as Berber jihadists from Saharan Africa. Ironically, as the political hold of various Muslim rulers weakened, Islamic civilization reached new heights of creativity.
As we shall see in this chapter, the Abbasid age was a time of remarkable achievements in architecture and the fine arts, in literature and philosophy, and in mathematics and the sciences. Many of these developments were enriched by the wealth, knowledge, and products exchanged among the many regions of an ever-expanding Muslim world and the non-Muslim peoples contacted in border regions from Europe to China. From the 10th to the 14th centuries, Muslim mystics, traders, and at times warriors carried the faith of Muhammad across much of the known world. In this chapter we will focus on this process in south and southeast Asia. In those that follow, north and west Africa and central Asia will be the focus of our inquiry.

THE ISLAMIC HEARTLANDS IN THE MIDDLE AND LATE ABBASID ERAS

8.1 What were the major sources contributing to the decline of the Abbasid dynasty?

As early as the reign of the third Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi (r. 775–785), the courtly excesses and political divisions that eventually contributed to the decline of the empire were apparent. Al-Mahdi's efforts to reconcile the moderates among the Shi'a opposition to Abbasid rule failed in failure. This meant that Shi'a revolts and assassination attempts against Abbasid officials would plague the dynasty to the end of its days. Al-Mahdi also abandoned the frugal ways of his predecessor. In the brief span of his reign, he cultivated a taste for luxury and monumental building and surrounded himself with a multitude of dependent wives, concubines, and courtiers. These habits would prove to be an even greater financial drain in the reigns of later caliphs.

Perhaps most critically, al-Mahdi failed to solve the vexing problem of succession. Not only did he wager between which of his older sons would succeed him, but he allowed his wives and concubines, the mothers of different candidates, to become involved in the palace intrigues that became a standard feature of the transfer of power from one caliph to the next. Although a full-scale civil war was avoided after al-Mahdi's death, within a year his eldest son and successor was poisoned. That act cleared the way for one of the most famous and enduring of the Abbasid caliphs, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), to ascend the throne.

Imperial Extravagance and Succession Disputes

Emissaries sent in the early 9th century to Baghdad from Charlemagne (Map 8.1), then the most powerful monarch in Christian Europe, provide ample evidence that Harun al-Rashid shared his father's taste for sumptuous living. Harun al-Rashid dazzled the Christians with the splendor of Baghdad's mosques, palaces, and treasure troves, which is reflected in the painting of nightlife in a palace in Figure 8.2. He also sent them back to Charlemagne with presents, including an intricate water clock and an elephant, which were literally worth a king's ransom.

The luxury and intrigue of Harun's court have also been immortalized by the tales of The Thousand and One Nights (see the Document in Chapter 7), set in the Baghdad of his day. The plots and maneuvers of the courtiers, eunuchs, and royal ministers related in the tales suggest another source of dynastic weakness. Partly because he was only 23 at the time of his accession to the throne, Harun became heavily dependent, particularly in the early years of his reign, on a family of Persian advisors. Although he eventually resisted their influence, the growth of the power of royal advisors at the expense of the caliphs became a clear trend in succeeding reigns. In fact, from the mid-9th century onward, most caliphs were pawns in the power struggles between different factions at the court.

Harun al-Rashid's death prompted the first of several full-scale civil wars over succession. In itself, the precedent set by the struggle for the throne was deeply damaging. But it had an additional consequence that would add to the danger of the caliphs. The first civil war convinced the sons of al-Ma'mun (813–833), the winner, to build personal armies in anticipation of the fight for the throne that would break out when their father died. One of the successors, the victor in the next round of succession struggles, recruited a "bodyguard" of some 4000 slaves, mostly Turkic-speaking nomads from eastern Asia. On becoming caliph, he increased this mercenary force to more than 70,000.

Not surprisingly, this impressive army soon became a power center in its own right. In 846 slave mercenaries murdered the reigning caliph and placed one of his sons on the throne. In the next decade, four more caliphs were assassinated or poisoned by the mercenary forces. From this time onward, the leaders of the slave mercy armies were often the real power behind the Abbasid throne and were major players in the struggles for control of the empire. The mercenaries also became a major force for violent social unrest. They were often the catalyst for the food riots that broke out periodically when the price of everyday staples rose too sharply because of shortages or price gouging in Baghdad and other urban centers.
Imperial Breakdown and Agrarian Disorder

In the last decades of the 9th century, the dynasty brought the slave armies under control for a time, but at a great cost. Constant civil violence drained the treasury and alienated the subjects of the Abbasids. A further strain was placed on the empire's dwindling revenues by some caliphs' attempts to escape the turmoil of Baghdad by establishing new capitals near the original one. The construction of palaces, mosques, and public works for each of these new imperial centers added to the already exorbitant costs of maintaining an imperial administration. Of course, the expense fell heavily on the already hard-pressed peasantry of the central provinces of the empire, where some imperial control remained. The need to support growing numbers of mercenary troops also drained the revenue demands on the peasantry.

Spiraling taxation and outright pillaging led to the destruction or abandonment of many villages in the richest provinces of the empire. The great irrigation works that had for centuries been essential to agricultural production in the fertile Tigris–Euphrates basin fell into disrepair, and in some areas they collapsed entirely. Some peasants perished through flood, famine, or violent assault; others fled to wilderness areas beyond the reach of the Abbasid tax collectors or to neighboring kingdoms. Some formed bandit gangs or joined the crowds of vagabonds that trudged the highways and camped in the towns of the imperial heartland. In many cases, dissident religious groups, such as the various Shi'a sects, intrigued peasant uprisings. Shi'a participation meant that these movements sought not only to correct the official abuses that had occurred under the Abbasid regime but to destroy the dynasty itself.

The Declining Position of Women in the Family and Society

The harem and the veil became the twin emblems of women's increasing subjugation to men and confinement to the home in the Abbasid era. Although the seclusion of women had been practiced by some Middle Eastern peoples since ancient times, the harem was a creation of the Abbasid court. The wives and the concubines of the Abbasid caliphate were restricted to the forbidden quarters of the imperial palace. Many of the concubines were slaves, who could win their freedom and gain power by bearing healthy sons for the rulers. The growing wealth of the Abbasid elite created a great demand for female and male slaves, who were found by the tens of thousands in Baghdad and other large cities. Most of these urban slaves continued to perform domestic services in the homes of the wealthy. One of the 10th-century caliphs is reputed to have had 11,000 eunuchs among his slave corps; another is said to have kept 4000 slave concubines.

Most of the slaves had been captured or purchased in the non-Muslim regions surrounding the empire, including the Balkans, central Asia, and the eastern Mediterranean. The slave markets found in all of the larger towns of the Abbasid realm. Female and male slaves were prized for both their beauty and their intelligence. Some of the best-educated men and women in the empire were slaves. Consequently, caliphs and high Officials often spent more time with their clever and talented slave concubines than with the women they often had as their personal attendants, such as eunuchs. Slave women could go to the market, and they did not have to wear the veils and robes that were required for free women in public places. Although women from the lower classes formed, wore clothing and rugs, or raised silkworms by hand, they were allowed almost no career outlets beyond the home.

Often married at puberty (legally set at age 9), women were raised to devote their lives to running the household and serving their husbands. But at the highest levels of society, wives and concubines were frequently left behind as their husbands and eunuchs and royal advisors to advance the interests of their sons and win for them the ruler's backing for succession to the throne. Despite these brief incursions into politics, by the end of the Abbasid era, the freedom and influence—both within the family and in the wider world—that women had enjoyed in the first centuries of Islamic expansion had been severely curtailed.

Nomadic Inclusions and the Eclipse of Caliphal Power

Preoccupied by struggles in the capital and central provinces, the caliphs and their advisors were preoccupied with further losses of territory in the outer reaches of the empire. In addition, areas as close as the capital to Egypt and Syria broke away from Abbasid rule (Map 8.1). More alarmingly, by the mid-10th century, independent kingdoms that had formed in areas that were once provinces of the empire were moving to supplant the Abbasids as lords of the Islamic world. In 945, the amirs of one of these regional splinter dynasties, the Buyids of Persia, invaded the heartlands of the Abbasid empire and captured Baghdad. From this point onward, the caliphs were little more than puppet rulers controlled by families such as the Buyids. Buyid leaders took the title of sultan ("victorious") in Arabic, which came to designate Muslim rulers, especially in the West.

The Buyids controlled the caliph and the court, but they could not prevent the further disintegration of the empire. In just over a century, the Buyids' control over the caliphate was broken, and they were supplanted in 1055 by another group of nomadic invaders from central Asia via Persia, the Seljuk Turks. For the next two centuries, Turkic military leaders ruled the remaining portions of the Abbasid empire in the name of caliphs, who were usually of Arab or Persian extraction. The Seljuk Turks were staunch Sunni Muslims, and they moved quickly to purge the Shi'a officials who had risen to power under the Buyids and to rid the caliphate of the political influence of the Shi'a. The Seljuk rulers tried to promote. For a time, the Seljuk military machine was also able to restore political initiative to the much-reduced caliphate. Seljuk victories ended the threat of conquest by a rival Shi'a dynasty centered in Egypt. They also hobbled the Byzantines, who had hoped to take advantage of Muslim divisions to regain some of their lost lands. The Byzantines' crushing defeat also opened the way to the settlement of Asia Minor, or Anatolia, by nomadic peoples of Turkish origin, some of whom would soon begin to lay the foundations of the Ottoman Empire.

The Impact of the Christian Crusades

Soon after seizing power, the Seljuk Turks faced a very different challenge to Islamic civilization. It came from Christian crusaders, knights from western Europe (see Chapter 11) who were determined to capture the holy places of the Islamic world that had been lost in the land of biblical times. Muslim political divisions and the example of surprise made the first of the crusaders' assaults, between 1096 and 1099, by far the most successful. Much of the Holy Land was captured and divided into Christian kingdoms. In June 1099, the main objective of the Crusade, Jerusalem, was taken, and its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants were massacred by the rampaging Christian knights.

For nearly two centuries, the Europeans, who eventually mounted eight Crusades that varied widely in strength and success, maintained their precarious hold on the eastern Mediterranean region. But they posed little threat to the power of Muslim princes, whose disregard for the Christians was demonstrated by the fact that they continued to quarrel among themselves despite the intruders' aggressions.

When united under a strong leader, the Crusaders were formidable, and they were able to hold and at least partly control the Holy Land from 1099 to 1291. When divided among several strong leaders, they could not maintain their conquests. The last of the Crusader kingdoms was lost with the fall of Acre in 1291.

Undoubtedly, the impact of the Crusades was much greater on the Christians who launched them than on the Muslims who had to fend them off. Because there had long been so much contact between Muslims and Christians in Europe and the Islamic world by trade and through the Muslim kingdom in Spain and southern Italy, it is difficult to be sure which influences contributed to the Crusades. But the Crusaders' firsthand experiences in the eastern Mediterranean certainly intensified European attitudes towards Muslims. For example, Muslims who hoped to join the Crusades, such as the famous damascene swords (named after the city of Damascus), were highly prized and sometimes copied by the Europeans, who were always eager to improve on the methods of making war. Muslim techniques of building fortifications were adopted by many Christian rulers, as can be

Chapter 8 Abbasid Decline and the Spread of Islamic Civilization to South and Southeast Asia
Ibn Khaldun on the Rise and Decline of Empires

Although he lived in the century after the Abbasid caliphate was destroyed in 1258, Ibn Khaldun was very much a product of the far-flung Islamic civilization that the Abbasids had consolidated and expanded. He was also one of the greatest historians and social commentators of all time. After extensive travels in the Islamic world, he served as a political advisor at several of the courts of Muslim rulers in North Africa. With the support of a royal patron, Ibn Khaldun wrote a universal history that began with a very long philosophical preface called The Muqaddimah. Among the subjects he treated at length were the causes of the rise and fall of dynasties. The shifting fortunes of the dynasties he knew well in his native north Africa, as well as the fate of the Abbasids and earlier Muslim regimes, informed his attempts to find persistent patterns in the complex political history of the Islamic world. The following passages are from one of the most celebrated sections of The Muqaddimah on the natural life span of political regimes.

We have stated that the duration of the life of a dynasty does not as a rule extend beyond three generations. The first generation retains the desert qualities, desert toughness, and desert savagery. [Its members are used to] privation and to sharing their glory [with each other]; they are brave and rapacious. Therefore, the strength of group feeling continues to be preserved among them. They are sharp and greatly feared. People submit to them. They become dependent on the dynasty and are like women and children who need to be defended [by someone else]. Group feeling disappears completely. People forget to protect and defend themselves and to press their claims. With their arms, appalled, horseback riding, and [fighting] skill, they deceive people and give them the wrong impression. For the most part, they are more cowardly than women upon whose backs them, since they are so much given to a life of prosperity and ease.

Three generations last one hundred and twenty years. As a rule, dynasties do not last longer than that many years, a few more, a few less, sure when, by chance, no one appears to attack [the dynasty]. When senility becomes preponderant [in a dynasty], there may be no claimant [for its power, and then nothing will happen] but if there should be one, he will encounter no one capable of repelling him. If the time is up [the end of the dynasty] cannot be postponed for a single hour; no more than it can be accelerated.

QUESTIONS

What does this passage reveal about Ibn Khaldun’s views of the contrasts between nomads and urban dwellers?

Why does he see the former as a source of military power and political strength?

What forensic evidence do dynasties in later generations?

How well do these patterns correspond to the history of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties we have been studying?

The third generation, then, has [completely] forgotten the period of desert life and toughness, as if it had never existed. They have lost [the taste for] group feeling, because they are dominated by force. Luxury reaches its peak among them, because they are so much given to a life of prosperity and ease. They become dependent on the dynasty and are like women and children who need to be defended [by someone else]. Group feeling disappears completely. People forget to protect and defend themselves and to press their claims. With their arms, appalled, horseback riding, and [fighting] skill, they deceive people and give them the wrong impression. For the most part, they are more cowardly than women upon whose backs them, since they are so much given to a life of prosperity and ease.

To the dynasty to some degree, until God permits it to be destroyed, and it goes with everything it stands for.

Three generations last one hundred and twenty years. As a rule, dynasties do not last longer than that many years, a few more, a few less, sure when, by chance, no one appears to attack [the dynasty]. When senility becomes preponderant [in a dynasty], there may be no claimant [for its power, and then nothing will happen] but if there should be one, he will encounter no one capable of repelling him. If the time is up [the end of the dynasty] cannot be postponed for a single hour; no more than it can be accelerated.

Muslim influences affected both the elite and popular cultures of much of western Europe in this period. These included Persian and Arabic words, games such as chess, chivalric ideals and troubadour ballads, as well as foods such as dates, coffee, and yogurt. Some of these imports, notably the songs of the troubadours, can be traced directly to the contacts the crusaders made in the Holy Land. But most were part of a process of exchange that extended over centuries, and was largely a one way process. Although Arab traders imported some manufactures, such as glass and cloth, and raw materials from Europe, Muslim peoples in this era showed little interest in the learning or institutions of the West. Nevertheless, the Italian merchant communities, which remained after the political and military power of the crusaders had been extinguished in the Middle East, contributed a great deal more to these ongoing interactions than all the forays of Christian knights.

AN AGE OF LEARNING AND ARTISTIC REFINEMENTS

Although town life became more dangerous, the rapid growth and increasing prosperity that characterized the first centuries of Muslim expansion continued until late in the Abbasid era. Despite the declining revenue base of the caliphate and deteriorating conditions in the countryside, there was a great expansion of the professional classes, particularly doctors, scholars, and legal and religious experts (Figure 8.3). Muslim, Jewish, and in some areas Christian entrepreneurs amassed great fortunes supplying the cities of the empire with staples such as grain and barley, essentials such as cotton and wool, and textiles for clothing, and luxury items such as precious gems, citrus fruits, and sugar cane. Long-distance trade between the Middle East and Mediterranean Europe and between coastal India and southeast Asia, in addition to the overland caravan trade with China, flourished through much of the late-Abbasid period (Map 8.2).

Among the chief beneficiaries of the sustained urban prosperity were artists and artisans, who continued the formidable achievements in architecture and the crafts that had begun in the Umayyad period. Mosques and palaces grew larger and more ornate. Even in outlying areas, such as Córdoban Spain, Muslim engineers and architects created some of the great architectural treasures of all time. The tapestries and rugs of Muslim peoples, most famously the Persians, were in great demand from Europe to China. To this day, Muslim rugs have rarely been matched for their exquisite design, their vivid colors, and the skill with which they are woven. Muslim artisans also produced fine bronzes and superb ceramics.

The Full flowering of Persian Literature

As Persian wives, concubines, advisors, bureaucrats, and (after the mid-10th century) Persian caliphs came to play central roles in imperial politics, Persian gradually replaced Arabic as the primary written language at the Abbasid court. Arabic remained the language of religion, law, and the natural sciences. Persian was favored by Arabs, Turks, and Muslims of Persian descent as the language of literary expression, administration, and scholarship. In Baghdad and major cities throughout the Abbasid empire and in neighboring kingdoms, Persian was the chief language of "high culture," the language of polite exchanges between courtiers as well as of history, poetic musings, and mystical revelations.

Written in a modified Arabic script and drawing selectively on Arabic vocabulary, the Persian of the Abbasid age was a supple language as beautiful to look at when drafted by a skilled calligrapher as it was reading aloud. Catch phrases ("A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and Tho") from the Rubaiyat (ROO-bee-AHT) of Omar Khayyam (OH-mahr kheh-YAHM) are certainly the pieces of Persian literature best known in the West. But certain other works passed through Khayyam in prosperity of thought and elegance of style. Perhaps the single most important work was the lengthy epic poem Shah-Nama (Book of Kings), written by Firdawsi in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The work relates the history of Persia from the beginnings of time to the Islamic conquests, and it abounds in dramatic details of battles, intrigues, and illicit love affairs. Firdawsi’s Persian has been extolled for

Paradoxically, even as the political power of the Abbasiddeclined, Islamic civilization reached new heights of achievement and entered into a phase of renewed expansion.
In Discourse between Muslim Sages, theologians struggled to fuse Greek and Qur'anic traditions, not entirely accepted by Ulama. The meditative figures, with scholarly books before them, surrounded by grass and trees, captures the commitment to learning and refined aesthetic sense that was cultivated by members of the elite classes throughout the Islamic world.

Achievements in the Sciences

From preserving and compiling the learning of the ancient civilizations they had conquered in the early centuries of expansion, Muslim peoples—and the Jewish scholars who lived peacefully in Muslim lands—increasingly became creators and inventors in their own right. For several centuries, which spanned much of the period of Abbasid rule, Islamic civilization outstripped all others in scientific discoveries, new techniques of investigation, and new technologies. The many Muslim accomplishments in these areas include major corrections to the algebraic and geometric theories of the ancient Greeks and great advances in the use of basic concepts of trigonometry: the sine, cosine, and tangent.

Two discoveries in chemistry that were fundamental to all later investigation were the creation of one atomic weight and the discovery of the noble gases. In scientific discoveries, new techniques of investigation, and new technologies. The many Muslim accomplishments in these areas include major corrections to the algebraic and geometric theories of the ancient Greeks and great advances in the use of basic concepts of trigonometry: the sine, cosine, and tangent.

FIGURE 8.3 The subtlety and depth attained by Muslim civilizations in the far-flung regions in which they were found is illustrated by this 17th-century watercolor painting titled A Conference between Muslim Sages. The meditative figures, with scholarly books before them, surrounded by grass and trees, captures the commitment to learning and refined aesthetic sense that was cultivated by members of the elite classes throughout the Islamic world.

Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Ibn Khayrân

Iblam. Orthodox religious scholars within Islam; pressed for a more comprehensive and stable theology; increasingly opposed to non-Islamic ideas and scientific thinking. al-Ghazali [al-Ghazālī, 1058-1111] Brillant Islamic theologian; struggled to fuse Greek and Qur'anic traditions; not entirely accepted by Ulama.

View the Image on MyHistoryLab: Islamic science and alchemy; page from "The Lanterns of Wisdom and the Keys of Mercy"

Religious Trends and the New Push for Expansion

The contradictory trends in Islamic civilization—social strife and political divisions versus expanded trading links and intellectual creativity—were strongly reflected in patterns of religious development in the later centuries of the caliphate. On one hand, a resurgence of mysticism injected Islam with a new vibrancy. On the other, orthodox religious scholars, such as the Ulama, grew increasingly suspicious of and hostile to non-Islamic ideas and scientific thinking. The Crusades had promoted the latter trend. This was particularly true regarding Muslim borrowing from ancient Greek learning, which the Ulama associated with the aggressive civilizations of Christian Europe. Many orthodox scholars suspected that the questioning that characterized the Greek tradition would undermine the absolute authority of the Qur'an. They insisted that the Qur'an was the final, perfect, and complete revelation of an all-knowing divinity. Brilliant thinkers such as al-Ghazali perhaps the greatest Islamic theologian, struggled to fuse the Greek and Qur'anic traditions. Their ideas were often rejected by orthodox scholars.

Much of the religious vitality in Islam in the later Abbasid period was centered on the Sufist movement. In its various guises, including both Sunni and Shi'a manifestations, Sufism was a reaction against the impersonal and abstract divinity that many Ulama scholars argued was the true god of the Qur'an. Like the Indian mystics, the Sufis—whose title was derived from the woolen robes they wore—and their followers tried to see beyond what they believed to be the illusory existence of everyday life and to delight in the presence of Allah in the world. True to the strict monotheism of Islam, most Sufis insisted on a clear distinction between Allah and the Godhead. Central Asian nomadic peoples; smashed Turkic-Persian kingdoms; captured Baghdad in 1258 and killed last Abbasid caliph. Chinggis Khan [JINGGIS KHAân] Born in 1170s in decades following death of Kubilai Khan, elected khagan of all Mongol tribes in 1206; responsible for conquest of northern kingdoms of China, territories as far west as the Abbasid regions; died in 1227, prior to conquest of most of Islamic world. Hülegü [HUL-EE-goo] (1217-1265) Ruler of the Ilkhan khanate; grandson of Chinggis Khan; responsible for capture and destruction of Baghdad in 1258.

established a dynasty in Egypt; and working with a wide variety of navigational instruments conveys a strong sense the Mongols. They then continued westward until they were

cartographers, and scientists to develop instruments and maps, which were essential Baghdad never recovered from the Mongol attacks. In

FIGURE 8.4 This 15th-century Persian miniature of a group of Arab scientists testing and working with a wide variety of navigational instruments conveys a strong sense the premium placed on scientific investigation in the Muslim world in the Abbasid age and the centuries thereafter. Muslim prototypes inspired European artisans, cartographers, and scientists to develop instruments and maps, which were essential to European overseas expansion from the 14th century onward.

Mamluks Muslim slave warriors; established a dynasty in Egypt; defeated the Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260 and halted Mongol advance.

From the 7th century onward, Muslim invaders, traders, and migrants carried the Islamic faith and Islamic civilization to the vast South Asian subcontinent. Muslim conquests and conversions provided a variety of Hindu responses and attempts by some followers of both religions to reconcile their differences.

THE COMING OF ISLAM TO SOUTH ASIA

8.3 How did Hindu religious leaders and organizations counter the considerable appeal of Sufi missionaries and their efforts to win converts in south and southeast Asia from the 10th through the 16th centuries?

All through the millennia when a succession of civilizations from Harappa to the brahmanic empire of the Guptas developed into the civilizations they encountered in the lowland areas. They converted to the Hindu or Buddhist religion, found a place in the caste hierarchy, and adopted the dress, foods, and lifestyles of the farming and city-dwelling peoples of the many regions of the subcontinent. This capacity to absorb peoples moving into the area resulted from the strength and flexibility of India's civilizations and from the fact that India's peoples usually enjoyed a higher level of material culture than migrant groups entering the subcontinent. As a result, the persistent failure of Indian rulers to unite against aggressors meant periodic disruptions and localized destruction but not fundamental challenges to the existing order. All of this changed with the arrival of the Muslims in the last years of the 7th century C.E. (Map 8.2).

With the coming of the Muslims, the peoples of India encountered for the first time a large-scale influx of bears of an outside civilization as sophisticated, if not as ancient, as their own. They were also confronted by a religious system that was in many ways the very opposite of the ones they had nurtured. Hinduism, the predominant Indian religion at that time, was open, tolerant, and inclusive. Of widely varying forms of religious devotion, from idol worship to meditation in search of union with the spiritual source of all creation, Islam was doctrinaire, proselytizing, and committed to the exclusive worship of a single, transcendent god.

The Pattern of Islam's Global Expansions

The table shows the present-day distribution of Muslims in key countries from Africa to Asia. It indicates the total number of Muslims in each of the countries listed, the percentage of Muslims in the total population of that area, and the numbers and percentages of other religious groups. The table also indicates the manner in which Islam was spread to each of these areas and the key agents of that diffusion. After using the table to compare the patterns of Islamization in different areas, answer the questions that follow.

Comparative Statistics of Modern States with a Sizable Muslim Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Population (2000 est.)</th>
<th>Total Number of Muslims</th>
<th>Percentage of Muslims</th>
<th>Total Number of Non-Muslims</th>
<th>Percentages of Other Religious Groups</th>
<th>Principal Agents/Modes of Conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>114 million</td>
<td>57 million</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57 million</td>
<td>40-Christian, 10-Other (African religions)</td>
<td>Trading Contacts, Missions, Missionaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>67 million</td>
<td>63 million</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4 million</td>
<td>4-Christian, 2-Other</td>
<td>Arab Conquest, Migration, Missionary Conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>22.5 million</td>
<td>21.8 million</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>577 million</td>
<td>4-Christian, 2-Other</td>
<td>Arab Conquest, Migration, Missionary Conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>65 million</td>
<td>64.3 million</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>590 million</td>
<td>3-Other (Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish)</td>
<td>Arab Conquest, Migration, Missionary Conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>138 million</td>
<td>133.85 million</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>4.15 million</td>
<td>3-Other (Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai)</td>
<td>Sufi, Missionaries, Missionary Conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1.01 billion</td>
<td>141.0 million</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>860.9 million</td>
<td>8-Buddhist, 6-Other (Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Jain)</td>
<td>Sufi, Missionaries, Trading Contacts, Missionary Conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>216 million</td>
<td>188 million</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>28 million</td>
<td>6-Protestant, 7-Other (Catholic, etc.)</td>
<td>Sufi, Missionaries, Trading Contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>79.5 million</td>
<td>4 million</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>75.5 million</td>
<td>5-Catholic, 6-Protestant, 3-Other</td>
<td>Trading Contacts, Missions, Missionaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>30 million</td>
<td>29.7 million</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>300 million</td>
<td>1-Other</td>
<td>Voluntary Missionary Conversion, Missionaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions:

- Which areas have the highest absolute numbers of Muslims in the present day?
- Is this distribution what you would have expected, or is it surprising?
- What were the main ways that Islam was transmitted to most areas?
- What does this say about the popular notion that Islam was historically a militant religion spread primarily by forcible conversion?
- Do the statistics suggest that Islam is able to coexist with other faiths?

Socially, Islam was highly egalitarian, proclaiming all believers equal in the sight of God. In sharp contrast, Hindu beliefs validated the caste hierarchy. The latter rested on the acceptance of inborn differences between individuals and groups and the widely varying levels of material wealth, status, and religious purity these differences were believed to produce. Thus, the faith of the invading Muslims was religiously more rigid than that of the absorptive and adaptive Hindus. But the caste-based social system of India was much more compartmentalized and closed than the society of the Muslim invaders, with their emphasis on mobility and the community of believers.

Because growing numbers of Muslim warriors, traders, Sufi mystics, and ordinary farmers and herdsmen entered south Asia and settled there, extensive interaction between invaders and the indigenous peoples was inevitable. In the early centuries of the Muslim influx, conflict, often violent, predominated. But there was also a good deal of trade and even religious interchange between them. As time passed, peaceful (if often wary) interaction became the norm. Muslim rulers employed large numbers of Hindus to govern the largely non-Muslim populations they conquered; mosques and temples dominated different quarters within Indian cities. In addition, Hindu and Muslim mystics strove to find areas of agreement between their two faiths. Nonetheless, tensions remained, and periodically they erupted into communal rioting or warfare between Hindu and Muslim rulers.

Political Divisions and the First Muslim Invasions

The first and least enduring Muslim intrusion, which came in 711, resulted indirectly from the peaceful trading contacts that had initially brought Muslims into contact with Indian civilization. Since ancient times, Arab seafarers and traders had been major carriers in the vast trading network that stretched from Italy in the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. After converting to Islam, these traders continued to visit the ports of India, particularly those on the western coast. An attack by pirates sailing from Sind in western India (Map 8.3) on ships owned by some of these Arab traders prompted the viceroy of the eastern provinces of the Umayyad Empire to launch a punitive expedition against the king of Sind. An able Arab general, Muhammad ibn Qasim who was only 17 years old when the campaign began, led more than 10,000 horse- and camel-mounted warriors into Sind to avenge the assault on Arab shipping. After victories in several fiercely fought battles, Muhammad ibn Qasim declared the region, as well as the Indus valley to the northeast, provinces of the Umayyad empire.

In these early centuries, the coming of Islam brought little change for most inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. In fact, in many areas, local leaders and the populace surrendered towns and districts willingly to the conquerors because they promised lighter taxation and greater religious tolerance. The Arab overlords decided to treat both Hindus and Buddhists as protected "people of the book."
Mahmud of Ghazni ([n-MAHROM of GAZNE-nee] 971–1030) Third ruler of Turkic slave dynasty in Afghanistan; led raids of northern India; credited with sacking one of wealthiest cities in northern India; gave Muslims reputation for intolerance and aggression.

Muhammad of Ghur (1171–1206) Military commander of Persian extraction who reduced small mountain kingdom in Afghanistan; began process of conquest to establish Muslim political control of northern India; brought much of Indus valley, Sind, and northwestern India under his control.

Qutb-ud-din IAlbak ([KUHTH-ud-din ay-BAAH] Lieutenant of Mahmud of Ghur; established kingdom in India with capital at Delhi; proclaimed himself Sultan of India 1206–1210;)

with first the Umayyads and later the Abbasid caliphs gradually weakened the Muslim hold on the continent. This was particularly true when those who were spreading the new faith had the charisma and legend of wealth of the subcontinent and a zeal to spread the Muslim faith, Mahmud repeatedly raided northwest India in the first decades of the 11th century. He defeated one confederation of Hindu princes after another, and he drove deeper and deeper into the subcontinent in the quest of ever richer temples to loot.

The raids mounted by Mahmud of Ghazni and his successors gave way in the last decades of the 12th century to sustained campaigns aimed at seizing political control in north India. The key figure in this transition was a tenacious military commander of Persian extraction, Muhammad of Ghur. After barely surviving several severe defeats at the hands of Hindu rulers, Muhammad put together a string of military victories that brought the Indus valley and much of north central India under his control. In the following years, Muhammad's conquests were extended along the Gangetic plain; as far as Bengal, and into west and central India, by several of his most gifted subordinate commanders. After Muhammad was assassinated in 1206, Qutb-ud-din IAlvak, one of his slave lieutenants, seized power.

Significantly, the capital of the new Muslim empire was at Delhi along the Jamuna River on the Gangetic plain. Delhi's location in the center of northern India graphically proclaimed that a Muslim dynasty rooted in the subcontinent itself, not an extension of a Middle Eastern central Asian empire, had been founded. For the next 300 years, a succession of dynasties ruled much of north and central India. Alternately of Persian, Afghan, Turkic, and mixed descent, the rulers of these imperial houses proclaimed themselves the rulers of Delhi (literally, princes of the heartland). They fought each other, Mongol and Turkic invaders, and the indigenous Hindu princes for control of the Indus and Gangetic heartlands of Indian civilization.

Patterns of Conversion

Although the Muslims fought their way into India, their interaction with the indigenous peoples soon came to be dominated by accommodation and peaceful exchanges. Over the centuries when much of the north was ruled by dynasties composed of Delhi, sizable Muslim communities developed in different areas of the subcontinent. The largest of these were in Bengal, and in the northwestern areas of the Indus valley that were the points of entry for most of the Muslim peoples who migrated into India.

Few of these converts were won forcibly. The main carriers of the new faith often were merchants, who played a growing role in both coastal and inland trade, but were mostly especially Sufi mystics. The latter shared much with Indian gurus and wandering ascetics in both style and message. Belief in their magical and healing powers enhanced the Sufis' stature and increased their following. Their mosques and schools often became centers of regional political power. Sufis organized their devotees in militias to fend off bandits or rival princes, oversaw the clearing of forests for farming and settlement, and welcomed low-caste and outcaste Hindu groups into Islam. After their deaths, the tombs of Sufi mystics became objects of veneration for Indian Muslims as well as for Hindus and Buddhist pilgrims. Most of the indigenous converts, who came to form a majority of the Muslims living in India, were drawn from specific regions and social groups. Surprisingly small numbers of converts were found in the Indo-Gangetic centers of Muslim political power, a fact that suggests the very limited importance of forced conversions. Most Indians who converted to Islam were from Buddhist or low-caste groups. In areas such as western India and Bengal, where Buddhism had survived as a popular religion until the era of the Muslim invasions, esoteric rituals and corrupt practices had debased Buddhism teachings and undermined the morale of the monastic orders.

This decline was accelerated by Muslim raids on Buddhist temples and monasteries, which provided vulnerable and lucrative targets for the early invaders. Without monastic supervision, local congregations sank further into orgies and experiments with magic. All of these trends opposed the Buddha's social concerns and religious message. Disorganized and misdirected, Indian Buddhism was no match for the confident and vigorous new religion the Muslims carried into the subcontinent. This was particularly true when those who were spreading the new faith had the charisma and organizing skills of the Sufi mystics.
Conversion and Accommodation in the Spread of World Religions

ALTHOUGH NOT ALL GREAT CIVILIZATIONS HAVE

world religions are those that spread across many cultures

religions, the two tend to be closely associated throughout human

and central Asia, and Buddhism, which spread even more widely

and societies, forge links between civilized centers, and bring civi-

scattered throughout the Middle East,

spread not because

in ancient times: Hinduism, which spread to parts of southeast

Islam. As we have seen, India alone produced two of these faiths

homeland by Roman persecution and

non-Jewish cultures but because the

decisions about whom to marry or how

must be well enough defined to allow its followers to maintain

very definite doctrines, and elaborate rituals and principles of

beliefs and ceremonial patterns of earlier world religions such as

is particularly true if

when the religion was introduced into new, non-Islamic cultures.

Buddhism and Hinduism. However, closer examination reveals

that Islamic beliefs and social practices, as written in the Qur'an

spread,

Because religious conversion affects

all aspects of life, from the way one looks at the universe to mundane

decisions about whom to marry or how to treat others, a world religion must be

broad and flexible enough to accommodate the existing culture of potential converts. At the same time, its core beliefs and practices must be well enough defined to allow its followers to maintain a clear sense of common identity despite their great differences in culture and society. Those beliefs and practices must be sufficiently profound and sophisticated to convince potential converts that their own cultures can be enriched and their lives improved by adopting the new religion.

In most instances, until the 16th century, when Christianity spread through the Western Hemisphere, no world religion could go global and spread as much of itself as Christianity did. Islam and Buddhism are the two most important world religions to have gone international. Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean region before claiming northern and western Europe as its core area. Judaism spread as well but not as widely in non-Jewish cultures as it did in the Christian world. Islam was adopted rather than imposed, those who converted had a good deal to say about how much of their own cultures they would change and which aspects of Islam they would emphasize or accept. Certain beliefs and practices were obligatory for all true believers: the worship of a single god, adherence to the prophet Muhammad, and the observance of the five pillars of the faith. But even these were subject to reinterpretation. In virtually all cultures to which it spread, Islamic monotheism supplanted but did not eradicate the animistic vener.

The fact that Islam won converts overwhelmingly through peaceful contacts between long-distance traders and the preexisting and organizational skills of Sufis exemplifies this capacity for accommodation.

place deities, Allah was acknowledged as the most powerful

supernatural force, but people continued to make offerings to spirits that could heal, bring fertility, protect their homes, or punish their enemies. In such areas as Africa and western China, where the veneration of ancestral spirits was a key aspect of religious life, the spirits were retained not as powers in themselves but as emissaries to Allah. In cultures such as those found in India and southeast Asia, Islamic doctrines were recast in a heavily mystic, even magical mode.

The flexibility of Islam was exhibited in the social as well as the religious sphere. In Islamic southeast Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, the position of women remained a good deal stronger in critical areas, such as occupation and family law, than it had become in the Middle East and India. In both regions, the male-centric features of Islam that had grown more pronounced through centuries of acculturation in ancient Middle Eastern and Persian cultures were played down. As Islam was adapted to societies where women had traditionally enjoyed more influence, both within the extended family and in occupations such as farming, marketing, and craft production. Even the caste system of India, which in principle is opposed to the strong egalitarian strain in Islam, developed among Muslim groups that migrated into the subcontinent and survived in indigenous south Asian communities that converted to Islam.

Beyond basic forms of social organization and interaction, Islam has the most intriguing feature of all, a capacity to be absorbed into societies in which it spread. For example, the African solar calendar, which was essential for coordinating the planting cycle, was retained along with the Muslim lunar calendar. In India, Hindu-Buddhist symbols of kingdom were appropriated by Muslim rulers and acknowledged by both their Hindu and Muslim subjects. In island southeast Asia, exquisitely forged knives, called Kebir, which were believed to have magical powers, were among the most treasured possessions of local rulers both before and after they converted to Islam.

There was always the danger that accommodation could go far too far; that in winning converts, Islamic principles could be so watered down and remolded that they no longer resembled or actually contradicted the teachings of the Qur'an. Sects that came to worship Muhammad or his nephew Ali as godlike, for example, clearly violated fundamental Muslim principles. This danger was a key source of the periodic movements for purification and revival that have been a notable feature of nearly all Islamic societies, particularly those on the fringes of the Islamic world. But even these movements, which were built around the insistence that the Muslim faith had been corrupted by alien ideas and practices and that a return to Islamic fundamentals was needed, were invariably cast in the modes of cultural expression of the peoples to whom they appealed.

Questions:

Can you think of ways in which world religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, changed to accommodate the cultures and societies to which they spread?

Do these religions strike you as more or less flexible than Islam?

CHAPTER 8 Abbasid Decline and the Spread of Islamic Civilization to South and Southeast Asia

bhaktic cults \(\text{(BAHK-teek)}\) Hindu groups dedicated to gods and goddesses; stressed the importance of strong emotional bonds between devotees and the god or goddess who was the object of their veneration; most widely worshipped gods were Shiva and Vishnu.

Mira Bai \(\text{M[\text{H]RR-uh Bay[\text{\}}}\) celebrated Hindu writer of religious poetry; reflected openness of bhaktic cults to women.

Kahir \(\text{(DH-eer)}\) Muslim mystic; played down the importance of ritual in bhaktic Hinduism.

Shrivijaya \(\text{(SHREE-vih-JAY-uh)}\) Islam. If one played down the teachings of the Qur'an, prayer, and the pilgrimage, one was no longer a true Muslim. Thus, contrary to the teachings of Kabir and like-minded mystics, the ulama and even some Sufi ulama stressed the teachings of Islam that separated it from Hinduism. They worked to promote unity within the Indian Muslim community and to strengthen its contacts with Muslims in neighboring lands and the Middle Eastern centers of the faith.

From centuries of invasion and migration, a large Muslim community had been established in the Indian subcontinent. Converts had been won, political control had been established throughout much of the area, and strong links had been forged with Muslims in other lands such as Persia and Afghanistan. But non-Muslims, particularly Hindus, continued to overwhelm the minority of the population of the vast and diverse lands south of the Himalayas. Unlike the Zoroastrians in Persia or the animistic peoples of north Africa and the Sudan, most Indians showed little inclination to convert to the religion of the Muslim conquerors. After centuries of Muslim political dominance and missionary activity, south Asia remained one of the least converted and integrated of all the areas Muhammad's message had reached.

**The Spread of Islam to Southeast Asia**

From the 13th century, traders and Sufi mystics spread Islam to islands southeast Asia. As was the case in India, conversion was generally peaceful, and Islamic teachings and rituals were mingled with the animist, Hindu, and Buddhist religions long established in Malaya, Java, and other areas.

Shrivijaya \(\text{(SHREE-vih-JAY-uh)}\) Trading empire centered on Malacca Straits between Malaya and Sumatra; controlled trade of empire; Buddhist government resistant to Muslim missionaries; fell open-endedly southeast Asia to Muslim conversion.

Stand-Off: The Muslim Presence in India at the End of the Sultanate Period

The attempts of mystics such as Kabir to minimize the differences between Hindu and Islamic beliefs and worship won over only small numbers of the followers of either faith. They were also strongly repudiated by the guardians of orthodoxy in each religious community. Sensing the long-term threat to Hinduism posed by Muslim political dominance and conversion efforts, the brahmans denounced the Muslims as idolaters and polluters of sanctuaries. Later Hindu mystics, such as the 13th-century holy man Chaitanya, composed songs that focused on love for Hindu deities and set out to convince Indian Muslims to renounce Islam in favor of Hinduism.

For their part, Muslim ulama, or religious experts, grew increasingly aware of the dangers Hinduism posed for Islam. Attempts to fuse the two faiths were rejected on the grounds that although Hindus might argue that specific rituals and beliefs were not essential, they were fundamental for Islam. If one played down the teachings of the Qur'an, prayer, and the pilgrimage, one was no longer a true Muslim. Thus, contrary to the teachings of Kabir and like-minded mystics, the ulama and even some Sufi ulama stressed the teachings of Islam that separated it from Hinduism. They worked to promote unity within the Indian Muslim community and to strengthen its contacts with Muslims in neighboring lands and the Middle Eastern centers of the faith.

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**The Attempts to Convert to Islam**

In the 10th century, the Muslim empires of Iraq and Persia were expanding and a Muslim presence began to develop in areas around the Indian Ocean. Islamic merchants and sailors introduced local peoples to the ideas and rituals of the new faith and impressed on them how much of the known world had already been converted. Muslim ships also carried Sufis to various parts of southeast Asia, where they played a vital role in conversion as they had in India. The first areas to be won to Islam in the late 13th century were several small port centers on the northern coast of Sumatra. From these ports, the religion spread in the centuries that followed across the Strait of Malacca to Malaya.

On the mainland, the key to widespread conversion was the powerful trading city of Malacca, whose smaller trading empire had replaced the fallen Shrivijaya. From Malacca, Islam spread along the coasts of Malaya to east Sumatra and to the trading center of Demak on the north coast of Java. From Demak, the most powerful of the trading states on north Java, the Muslim faith spread to other Javanese ports. After a long struggle with a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in the interior, the rest of the island was eventually converted. From Demak, Islam was also carried to the Celebes and the Spice Islands in the eastern archipelago, and from the latter to Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

This progress of Islamic conversion shows that port cities in coastal areas were particularly receptive to the new faith. Here trading links were critical. Once one of the key cities in a trading cluster converted, it was in the best interest of others to follow suit to enhance personal ties and provide a common basis in Muslim law to regulate business deals. Conversion to Islam also linked these centers, culturally as well as economically, to the merchants and ports of India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean.

Islam made slow progress in areas such as central Java, where Hindu-Buddhist dynasties contested its spread. But the fact that the earlier conversion to these Indian religions had been confined mainly to the ruling elites in Java and other island areas left openings for mass conversions to Islam that the Sufis eventually exploited. The island of Bali, where Indonesian had taken deep root at the popular level, remained largely impervious to the spread of Islam. The same was true of most of mainland southeast Asia, where centuries before the coming of Islam, Buddhism had spread from India and Ceylon and won the fervent adherence of both the ruling elites and the peasant masses.

**Trading Contacts and Conversion**

As in most of the areas to which Islam spread, peaceful contacts and voluntary conversion were far more important than conquest and in spreading the faith in southeast Asia. Throughout the islands of the region, trading contacts paved the way for conversion. Muslim merchants and sailors introduced local peoples to the ideas and rituals of the new faith and impressed on them how much of the known world had already been converted. Muslim ships also carried Sufis to various parts of southeast Asia, where they played as vital a role in conversion as they had in India. The first areas to be won to Islam in the late 13th century were several small port centers on the northern coast of Sumatra. From these ports, the religion spread in the centuries that followed across the Strait of Malacca to Malaya.

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Sufi Mystics and the Nature of Southeast Asian Islam

Because Islam was spread in many areas by Sufis from South Asia, it was often infused with mystical strains and incorporated animist, Hindu, and Buddhist elements. Just as they had in the Middle East and India, the Sufis who spread Islam in southeast Asia varied widely in personality and approach. Most were believed by those who followed them to have magical powers, and nearly all Sufis established mosques and school centers from which they traveled in neighboring regions to preach the faith.

In winning converts, the Sufis were willing to allow the inhabitants of island southeast Asia to retain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices that orthodox scholars would have found contrary to Islamic doctrine. Pre-Islamic customary law remained important in regulating social interaction, whereas Islamic law was confined to specific sorts of agreements and exchanges. Women retained a much stronger position, both within the family and in society, than they had in the Middle East and India. For example, trading in local and regional markets continued to be dominated by small-scale female buyers and sellers. In such areas as western Sumatra, lineage and inheritance continued to be traced through the female line after the coming of Islam, despite its tendency to promote male dominance and descent. Perhaps most telling, pre-Muslim religious beliefs and rituals were incorporated into Muslim ceremonies. Indigenous cultural staples, such as the brilliant Javanese puppet shadow plays that were based on the Indian epics of the brahmanic age, were refined, and they became even more central to popular and elite beliefs and practices than they had been in the pre-Muslim era.

Global Connections and Critical Themes

**ISLAM: A BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS**

Although problems of political control and succession continued to plague the kingdoms and empires that divided the Muslim world, the central position of Islamic civilization in global history was solidified during the centuries of Abbasid rule. Its role as the go-between for the more ancient civilizations of the Eastern Hemisphere grew as Arab trading networks expanded into new areas. More than ever, it enriched the lives of nomadic peoples, from the Turks and Mongols of central Asia to the Berbers of north Africa and the camel herders of the savanna regions south of the Sahara. Equally critically, Islam's original contributions to the growth and refinement of civilized life greatly increased. From its great cities and universities and the accomplishments generated in the fine arts, sciences, and literature to its vibrant religious and philosophical life, Islam pioneered patterns of organization and thinking that would affect the development of human societies in major ways for centuries to come.

**Further Readings**

M. A. Shabani's Islamic History: An Interpretation, 2 vols. (1971), contains the most readable and thematic survey of early Islam, concentrating on the Abbasid period. Although Philip Hitti's monumental History of the Arabs (1967) and J. J. Saunders' A History of Medieval Islam (1965) are now somewhat dated, they contain much valuable information and some fine insights into Arab history. Also useful are the works of G. F. von Grunebaum, especially Classical Islam (1970), which covers the Abbasid era. On changes in Islamic religion and the makeup of the Muslim community, Marshall Hodgson's Venture of Islam, vol. 2 (1974), is indispensable, but it should not be tackled by the beginner. The Cambridge History of Islam, 2 vols. (1978); Ira Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies (1988); and Albert Hourani, A History of the Islamic Peoples (1991), are excellent reference works for the political events of the Abbasid era and Muslim achievements in various fields. D. M. Dunlop's Arabic Civilization to A.D. 1500 (1971) also contains detailed essays on Islamic culture as well as an article on the accomplishments of Muslim women in this era.


Critical Thinking Questions

1. To what extent did Islam constitute the world's first global civilization?
2. What were the major reasons for the Sunni-Shi'a split in the Islamic umma?
3. What were the main motives for converting to Islam when full membership in the umma was opened to non-Arabs in the Abbasid Era?
4. In what ways did Muhammad's example and the teachings of the Quran make for improvements in the lives of women and what were the limits to these advances?