Abstract

The traces of Islam in Barus to this day still hold a mystery that has not been revealed. The Islamic cemetery complex in Barus holds abundant information about religious leaders who are believed to be the first Muslims to have spread Islam in the archipelago. The name of this city (Barus) refers to its natural resource of camphor. The gravestones in the Barus cemetery are written with inscriptions in Arabic and Persian scripts. Among the cemetery complexes there is a complex named Papan Tinggi. The purpose of this research is to contribute to the cultural treasures of Indonesia, especially the relationships between Indonesia and Central Asia at the beginning of the spread of Islam. The problem that arises is the extent to which the inscriptions can be interpreted from a foreign and local culture. The expected benefit of this research is to reveal more information about the role of Barus in Islamic culture development in Indonesia. The research method used includes three stages, namely data collection, data processing and interpretation. This study is expected to answer the early development of Islam in Barus.

Keywords: representation, identity, Islam Nusantara, Persia, Barus.

Introduction

Representation and identity are key terminologies in concepts related to cultural studies. Many studies in the field of cultural studies highlight this issue (Barker, 2000: 8). Cultural studies emphasise that meaning is very important in defining culture. A culture depends on how each member does an interpretation of the various objects and events around them, in other words it is known as 'making sense of world'. These members are the actors in giving meaning to various objects.

The meaning of something can be very different in different cultures or groups of society because in each culture or group of society they have their own
ways in interpreting something. Community groups with unequal backgrounds of understanding of certain cultural codes cannot comprehend the meaning produced by other groups of people. They must have a similar set of concepts and ideas to be able to interpret the world in the same way in order that they can become members of the same culture (having shared meanings).

Meaning is none other than a construction. Humans try to construct meaning strictly so that a meaning seems natural and unchangeable. Meaning is constructed through the representational system and generated through code. The code makes different societies within the same cultural group understand and use the same names, which have passed social convention process.

This representational theory uses a constructivist approach which argues that meaning is constructed through language. It argues that everything has no meaning, unless we construct that meaning using the concept of representational and signs systems (Hall, 2003: 25). Thus, concepts (in the mind) and signs become an important part used in the process of the construction or the production of meaning.

Based on the discussion above, it can be explained that representation is a process to produce meaning from concepts in our mind using signs. The process of producing that meaning is made possible by the presence of a representational system. However, the process of meaning depends on the background of knowledge and understanding of a social group on a sign. A group must have the same experience to be able to interpret something in an almost identical way.

When a group of humans has the same experience and the same way of representing or producing meaning to something, they have the same perspectives in perceiving the objects and events that appear around them. This process of representation is very closely related to identity.

“... identities are relational and contingent... They depend upon what they are defined against, and this may change over time or be understood differently in different places (Giles and Middleton, 1999: 34)”

The History of Islam in Barus

Barus port city was already known by Greek writers such as Ptolemies. Greek books such as the Priplous Tes Erythras written in 70 AD had mentioned "Indians and Greeks have been trading up to chryse Chryonesos" which is thought to be Barus and Lobu Tuo. Buddhist monk by the name I-Tsing in 671 AD also mentioned that the Arabs had traded on the west coast of Sumatra. Chord Hadbeh in 846 AD also mentioned about the port city of Barus. Sulaeman, a sailor in 857 AD, also stopped at this port. In addition, Professor M. P. Rivet mentioned that 6000 years ago, the maritime nation of Oceania (Indonesia) had spread out all the way to Sumerian Africa, Babylonia, Australia, South America and vice versa (Meuraxa 1973: 14-15).
Based on these opinions, we may infer that Barus and Lobu Tuo are port cities that have existed since the beginning of AD and continued to grow into the apostolic era of Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. It is estimated that Muslims who visited Indonesia in the 7th century were Arab merchants who stopped by in Sumatra on their way to China. Barus as the busiest city in the past was known by various names; India called it Balus, the Sulaeman Arabs called it Fansur nearby Barus, the Chinese called it Pan thsuh-rh or P Lou Zhe. In the book of Malay history published by a poet by the name Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi, there is a Sheikh named Ismail sent by Sharif Mecca to bring the Quran to Pasai, but apparently the aimed country was not so well known, so Shaykh Ismail first came to Barus and then Islamised the people of Barus (Meuraxa 1973: 22-25).

T.W. Arnold in his book "The Preaching of Islam" mentions that according to Chinese news in 674 AD, there had been an Arab ruler who became the head of the Arab settlement area on the west coast of the archipelago (Barus) (Arnold 1935: 364-365).

Arab traders named camphor with al-kafur which they obtained from Barus. The journey to obtain this natural resource could only be done by sea travel, so did Chinese merchants to obtain the goods from the west coast of Sumatra (de Casparis 1961: 14).

It is estimated that the west coast of Sumatra, namely Barus, is one of the oldest ports in Indonesia that has been visited by many countries. The name of the city itself, Barus, meaning camphor, can also be interpreted as the main producer of camphor, an ingredient commonly used for preservation of goods. Therefore, many argue that the first entry of Islam in Indonesia was in Barus. Sorted by the oldest dating, the evidence in the region of Barus which indicates that Barus is a location often visited by people outside the archipelago is a stone inscription found in Lobu Tuo which uses Tamil language. It shows that in the city of Barus, there were interactions taking place with other nations. Not far from Barus, there is an area called Kedai Gadang which has abundant ceramics displaying the characteristics of the 14th-18th century AD. It is estimated that the ceramics came from Yuan to Ching, whose characteristics were mixed with European ceramics (Ambary 1979: 12-13).

A written evidence about Barus is an inscribed pillar from Lobu Tuo near Pansur which is dated 1088 AD according to K.A. Nilakanta Sastri. This is thought to have originated from the Tamil trade union (Sastri 1932: 314-327; Drakard 1988: 17).

Tome Pires explains:

"We now have to tell the story of the very rich New Kingdom, also called Panchur or Pansur. Gujarati people call it Panchur, so do Persian, Arab, Bengali, Keling, and so on. In Sumatra, its name is Baros (Baruus). What is meant here is a kingdom, not two "(Cortesao 1944: 161-162).
Based on the records, it shows that the artefactual evidence of Barus as a bustling port city in the past is a Tamil-language inscription found in Lobu Tuo and the ceramics from China and Europe. The entry of Islam to Barus can be tracked based on the spread of Islamic influences on the cemeteries in Barus. The cemetery sites in Barus, now under District of Barus and North Barus, have some ancient Islamic graves in which there are several grave stones showing the identity of the buried figures and some Arabic inscriptions.

The relationship between Barus and Persia had started from the ancient age and obviously had existed before the Lobu Tuo era. Camphor was known during the 4th century AD in the Sassanid empire. Camphor entered the list of drugs of Sassanid civilization in the 6th century AD and only in the next century did the Arabian Muslim army find a camphor-filled jug when they captured the palace of the capital city Ctesiphon. The relationship between Barus and the Persian Gulf took place in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Next, the relationship of Barus with the Egyptian country around the 10th century AD started, this is based on the silver coins found in Fustat, which has been identified as the currency of Barus by R Wicks, 1997. Since the 14th century AD, Barus has become one of the first and most important centres of Islam in Sumatra (Guillot 2008: 57-58).

The gravestones on the Barus cemeteries show that Islam had grown in Barus during that period. Based on a board of information in Mahligai Cemetery Complex, the oldest grave is dated 44 H or about the 7th century AD. However, it is surely still necessary to review further contents of the gravestone. Some gravestones are identified to have two languages, which are Arabic and Persian (Guillot 2008: 297).

The influence of Persia is very strong, some gravestones is written with dates that show the name of the month before the year of the death of a figure. Some gravestones are written in Arabic script but its grammar uses the grammar of the Persian language (Guillot 2008: 299-300). Until now it is still a debate among some experts regarding the exact century of the entry of Islam to Barus.

Most of the gravestones in some cemetery complexes in the District of Barus and North Barus have been widely discussed by experts. The last one is Claude Guillot in his book "Barus one thousand years ago", which he describes in the last chapter some of the epigraphic techniques in examining the gravestones. In this study the description stage was also done considering that the problem to be answered is the extent to which Persian Islamic culture had affected Barus, especially seen from the existing gravestones. Description was done after a field observation was done. The description of the gravestones was done by examining the gravestones into two parts, namely the body and head to facilitate understanding. There are several Islamic cemetery complexes in the Districts of Barus and North Barus, the Ibrahim Cemetery Complex (Tuanku Batu Badan), Maqduum Cemetery Complex, Mahligai Cemetery Complex, Ambar Cemetery Complex, Kinali Cemetery, cemetery eroded by the river, and Papan Tinggi Cemetery. A cemetery complex consists of several gravestones that have certain shapes and inscriptions. Meanwhile, the Papan Tinggi Cemetery, despite consisting of approximately three small graves, the gravestones are made of
ordinary stones that have neither particular shape nor inscriptions like other gravestones in the area of Barus.

**Ibrahim Cemetery Complex**

The Ibrahim Cemetery Complex or Tuanku Batu Badan is located on a high plot of land behind residents’ houses, so from the road of Barus District—Aceh the presence of this cemetery is difficult to find if there is no notice. Consisting of 3 terraced grounds, on the first terrace there is no grave and is an area close to the entrance. This cemetery complex has a size of 14 x 8 metres and is located in Hasang Hill. It has *jirat* (tomb-like levels or ornament of stones above the grave) the region of Barus and it is the only one in this area of Barus. Its northern side is adjacent to the residents’ houses, its eastern side is adjacent to others houses or small shops, the southern side is bordered by the houses, and on its western side is the residents’ fields.

On the second terrace there are three graves that have a length of approximately 2 metres and are on the west side of the cemetery. The grave of Ibrahim or Tuanku Batu Badan is on the third terrace along with the other 9 graves. The grave of Ibrahim has a length of about 4 metres with a width of 2.4 metres of stone *jirat*. Next to it is a grave that has a gravestone and a *jirat* similar to the grave of Tuanku Ibrahim, only the gravestone is smaller. At present, the gravestones have worn out as the cemetery complex is open to direct exposure to sunlight and rain. On its northern side there is a pile of broken pieces of gravestones and graves.

The figures buried in this complex are believed to be one of 44 *Awliya* (people granted by God with certain specialities) spreaders of Islam in the area of Barus. The name Tuanku Batu Badan, according to the surrounding community, was because Tuan Ibrahim fought with the Dutch, was caught and taken to Aceh and eventually beheaded. But it became a chaos for the Dutch because every time his body and head are united, Tuan Ibrahim’s grave would come to life again and went against the Dutch. Therefore, his body was returned to Barus in a condition that his body and head were buried separately with a stone.

**Makhdum Cemetery Complex**

*Makhdum* Cemetery Complex is located on a small hill about 300 metres from the edge of the road Barus District—Aceh. The complex area is about 40 x 50 metres. The state of many gravestones in the complex have been broken although they have been taken care of. Some gravestones are similar to the gravestones in other Barus cemetery areas, which have cylinders with embellishing variants of vertical line, rectangular, and square lines. The head of the gravestones, meanwhile, is similar to most gravestones in other ancient cemetery areas in Barus, which have the shape a lotus or a candle holder and wavy triangles. The gravestones in this complex of *Makhdum* amounts to 33
gravestones, most of which have inscriptions of Islamic calligraphy, usually inscribed with the expression of *shahada*.

**Mahligai Cemetery Complex**

*Mahligai* Cemetery Complex is located in Barus District about 5 km from the city of Barus. The environment around the complex is now a field for the local community and has been well maintained that it becomes a religious tourism destination, both for Barus residents and people outside Barus. The complex area is approximately 400 x 220 metres. The shape of the gravestones in this complex are different, some are shaped like a mace, a rectangle with a frame in it, and so on. Most of the gravestones are made of andesite and rock.

Some of the figures believed to be one of the 44 Awliya, namely Sheikh Rukunuddin, Sheikh Ushuluddin, Sheikh Zainal Abidin Ilyas, Sheikh Ilyas, Sheikh Imam Khotib Mu'azzamshah Biktiba'i, Sheikh Shamsuddin, and Sheikh Abdul Khatib Siddiq. Based on the information boards available inside the burial complex, the oldest gravestone dates from 44 H or about the 8th century AD.

The shape of the gravestones is mostly rectangular with a head in triangular shape with arches. Then there is the head part of the gravestone that is shaped like a heart, a lotus shape or a candle holder, and a cylinder-shaped gravestone with vertical stripes ornate and a plain cylinder without ornament. Most of the inscriptions of Islamic calligraphy on the grave are inscribed with shahada, but some are thought to be in Arabic while the grammar is Persian, and some are thought to be in Persian itself. In addition to the graves of the Awliya, in the vicinity there are also several gravestones with the same shapes, but simpler in the depiction of its ornaments. The graves are thought to be the graves of the followers of the Awliya.

**Ambar Cemetery Complex**

The complex is located about 1.5 km to the north of the Ibrahim Cemetery Complex. Located 500 metres from the edge of the district road, the complex has an area of about 90 metres². On the north side are the local residents’ gardens/fields, the east side are their houses, the southern side are a ravine and some fields, and on the west side are the residents’ housing areas. During the field observation within this complex, there is a collection of gravestones that are still quite well maintained and neatly arranged on the eastern side of the cemetery complex. The conditions of the gravestones in this complex are mostly already worn out, many are broken and even unidentified.

It consists of three rows graves that stretch from east to west. The gravestones that are still quite in a good condition are located in the second row of the south because they are still identifiable (not experiencing fractures) with their rectangle shape. The northern and southern gravestones are 115 x 38 x 14 cm. The gravestone is on the north side, with an external sculpture of Islamic calligraphy and some information about the figure buried, although inscription cannot be read
clearly because of the wearing out. Meanwhile, on the inside of the gravestone there is a ornament, both on the body of gravestone and on its head. The ornament on the gravestones is a turreted dome in the centre of which hangs on an object that resembles a flower vase (chandelier (?)). On the edge of the picture there are plant ornaments and under the picture there are geometric shape ornaments. The head of the gravestone has a lotus ornament in its centre.

The graves of the south side are rectangular and rounded on the top (head of the gravestone) and there are ornaments on the legs and the inside. The ornament of the gravestone body is shaped like a dome resembling a niche (like a dome-shaped hole) and inside it is a buffalo head ornament, on which there are two lotus ornaments with each of the edges decorated with ornate lines. Between the body and the head of the gravestones, there are lotus flower ornaments. On the sides are decorated with a curved line that surrounds the head of the gravestone, while the gravestone is entirely decorated with lotus flowers. On this gravestone there is no inscription/Islamic calligraphy.

**Papan Tinggi Cemetery Complex**

The complex is located not far from Kampung Fansur, has a height of +/- 200 mdpl. It is located on a hilltop and to reach it requires people to climb approximately 800 steps. The burial area is 20 x 15 metres with eight graves; seven in groups and have a simple shape of gravestone made of andesite and natural rocks, therefore there is no visible Islamic calligraphy or certain ornaments.

One grave is separated from the other seven and is the main grave of a figure of 44 Awliya. According to the story of the local community, it is the grave of Sheikh Mahmud al Hadramaut and is made of granite. The southern gravestone is 147 x 47 x 10 cm in size and has a rectangular gravestone body and a triangular and wavy head. Nearby the gravestone are two jars planted in the ground, but their upper parts are already broken. The inscriptions are written in the body and the head of the gravestone, where the inscription on the gravestone body are placed inside a frame ornament. Some parts are difficult to read due to wear and tear. At the head of the gravestone there is an inscription from the verses of the Quran. Inside, both body and head of gravestone, there is a Persian-language inscription with Arab-Perso script.

**Variants of Gravestones in Persia**

Types of Persian gravestones are divided into two categories: pre-Islamic and after Islam gravestones. Shapes, writings and drawings on various gravestones can be found in the land of Persia. In principle, the shapes of the gravestones and the manner of corpse burial in every place and in every period of history show the kind of beliefs, ordinances, traditions and faiths of a people. The graves made researchers attentively take note of it as a part of the roadmap to find historical documents. Most of the gravestones from the Islamic periods have
special characteristics such as written Quranic verses, Kufi type calligraphy and flat images. The following are various kinds of gravestones and graves that exist in Iran.

1. Gravestones parallel to the ground, or slightly higher and protruding from the ground level
2. Gravestones that stand up like a pillar, usually resembles a mihrab of neatly arranged shapes and varieties
3. Gravestones that also stand up straight, but without any picture
4. Gravestones in the shape of box or casket
5. Gravestones in the shape of living creatures, such as lions, horses and people.

Traces of Persian Culture on the Gravestones of Barus

Trade networks and shipping in the past are believed to be one of the factors of religious relations, in this case is the transmission of Islam from West Asia and South Asia to the regions of the Archipelago-Indonesia. Muslim sailors and merchants are believed to participate in the process of spreading Islam in the archipelago, in addition to the arrival of preachers from the region of West Asia and South Asia who joined in the voyage. Besides, there is no doubt that there are scholars from the Archipelago, who studied in Mecca or Madina (Hejaz) in Arabia, participated to enliven the Islamization process¹ (Poesponegoro, ed.s, National History of Indonesia III, 1984, see also Chauduri, 1989).

There are many resemblances and similarities of typical Persian gravestones with the gravestones in the ancient graves of Barus, especially those pillar-shaped ones that stand like a Mihrab. In Persia, these gravestones in this form can be found in graves dating from the Islamic period. Almost all the gravestones of the important figures listed as religious figures in Barus have a tall, Mihrab-shaped pillar. And the most striking element of the gravestones is the grave of Sheikh Mahmud in Papan Tinggi, which according to Dada Meureksa (1963), it is dated 44 H. ² We assume that this grave is the oldest grave in Barus, by looking at the inscription that displays an 11th-century Persian classical poetry written by a poet named Firdawsi. The poem is in his book Shah Nameh or Risalah Para Raja, authored by Firdawsi (940-1020), in the chapter of battle between Rostam and Esfandiyar, which is as follows:

Jahan yadgar ast va ma raftani
Be gëiti namanad be juze mardumi

¹Marwati Djoesed Poesponegoro, eds, Sejarah Nasional Indonesia Jilid III, Jakarta, Balai Pustaka, 1984, also see Chauduri, K.N., Trade and Civilization in The Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

²We suspect that the year 44 H or the 7th century is too early as the estimated date of the grave, this is due to the fact that there is a Persian poetry inscribed on one of its gravestones, which is found to have been written by a poet living in the beginning of the 11th century.
which translates to:

The world is a memory and we will pass
Nothing left in this world except humanity

Firdawsi in Persian literature is titled as the father of Persian language. 
This title is given to him because his masterpiece of Shah Nameh was a milestone of Persian language revival after approximately three centuries produced in the shadow of the Arabic language.

A Short History of Firdawsi

Abu al Qasim Firdawsi the Judge was a poet and great epic writer of Iranian nation. He was born in Thoos, Khurasan, Iran precisely in the village of Baj, between the years 329-330 H or about 940 AD. As a village child very thoughtful of the customs and culture of the ancestors, he spent all his life in Thoos. He only made a trip once to Ghazni to present himself before Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, having completed his Shah Nameh masterpiece to offer to the Sultan. The track record on the education of Firdawsi is unknown, but from his work it is evident that Firdawsi was a genius who mastered various fields of sciences such as philosophy, theology and Arabic literature. In addition to the power of imagination, his skill in selecting and composing words is evident in every work he had produced.

Firdawsi’s father was a wealthy man of property, though he remained keen to study. From the beginning of his studies, Firdawsi was fond of and fell in love with the book of the story of the ancient Iran kings. Born of a dehqān (landlord) family, Firdawsi became acquainted with ancient Iranian culture and customs, and he deepened this field with the study of ancient knowledge that made it part of his poetic world view.

The documents and data on Firdawsi’s life that came to us first came from Nezami Aruzi, a 12th-century poet who visited Thoos in 1116 or 1117 to gather information about Firdawsi’s life. According to Nezami Aruzi, Firdawsi was born into a family of landlords near the village of Thoos in the north-eastern province of Khorasan. Firdawsi got married at the age of 28. Firdawsi began writing Shah Name as a project in which he spent about 33 years to complete.

The Position of Poetry in Persian Culture

"Poetry is the legacy of the nation’s wealth” such Persian slogans are always mentioned until now by the event executors in every state agenda. Poetry also becomes a national identity in fostering the spirit of nationalism. This is not an accident. Viewing from the perspective of the history of Persian literature, the period of literature coincided with the nation's history. Thus, the Persian intellectuals have almost entirely been poets and writers, such as Omar Khayyam, al Biruni and Ibn Sina all leaving works in poetry. The latter was a medical expert whose more than half of his work was written in poetry.
This art of speech is not a necessity but a gift given by God to the poets in the form of the ability to compose a sense with the word and the number of people given the grace is not much on the earth. The position of poetry is so crucial in life that since ancient times poetry has been the best medium to convey certain messages or promotions by individuals, groups, traders, kings and so forth. Poets are such as photographers who make poems on demand or ideas and concepts conveyed by the customers which then reflected in the form of words.

There is a connection between poetry and thought, this is what is implied if we examine the history of Persian civilization. The country of poetry and poets, thus the Persians pride on their culture. There is a strong connection in poetry; it is a collaboration between philosophy and aesthetics in the view of life. There are two important reasons why the Persians regard poetry as a value that should not escape in this life: the first because to maintain the tradition of poetry means to hold the national identity, and the second to maintain the tradition is also to see its own history. The bond of identity and the bond history, to ponder on the history is to preserve the tradition, that is the view of most Persians to this day. The strong and deep-rooted poetry culture of the Persians has made the position of poetry to be important and not only practiced for the living, hence it is considered to be important to also be written on gravestones.

Conclusion

The ancient graves in Barus, especially in the Papan Tinggi cemetery complex, is considered the oldest grave with Persian inscriptions on its gravestone. When directly seen at the site, it is a tall, mihrab-shaped grave accompanied by lantern ornaments. Certainly, the identity of the gravestone usually belongs to Sufis or teachers of the Sufis, this aspect will be examined in the future research. The poetry of a classical Persian poet named Firdawsi inscribed in the grave of Sheikh Mahmud in Papan Tinggi cemetery complex shows how poetry has an important role to have a place on the side of a great scholar’s gravestone. Gravestones in Barus, especially in the form of mihrab, can be also found in Uzbekistan, Azarbeijan and Iran with the same shapes and ornaments. The identity of Persian Islamic culture found in some of ancient gravestones in the Archipelago reaffirms the theory of the entry of Islam by the Sufis from Central Asia to the Archipelago.

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