

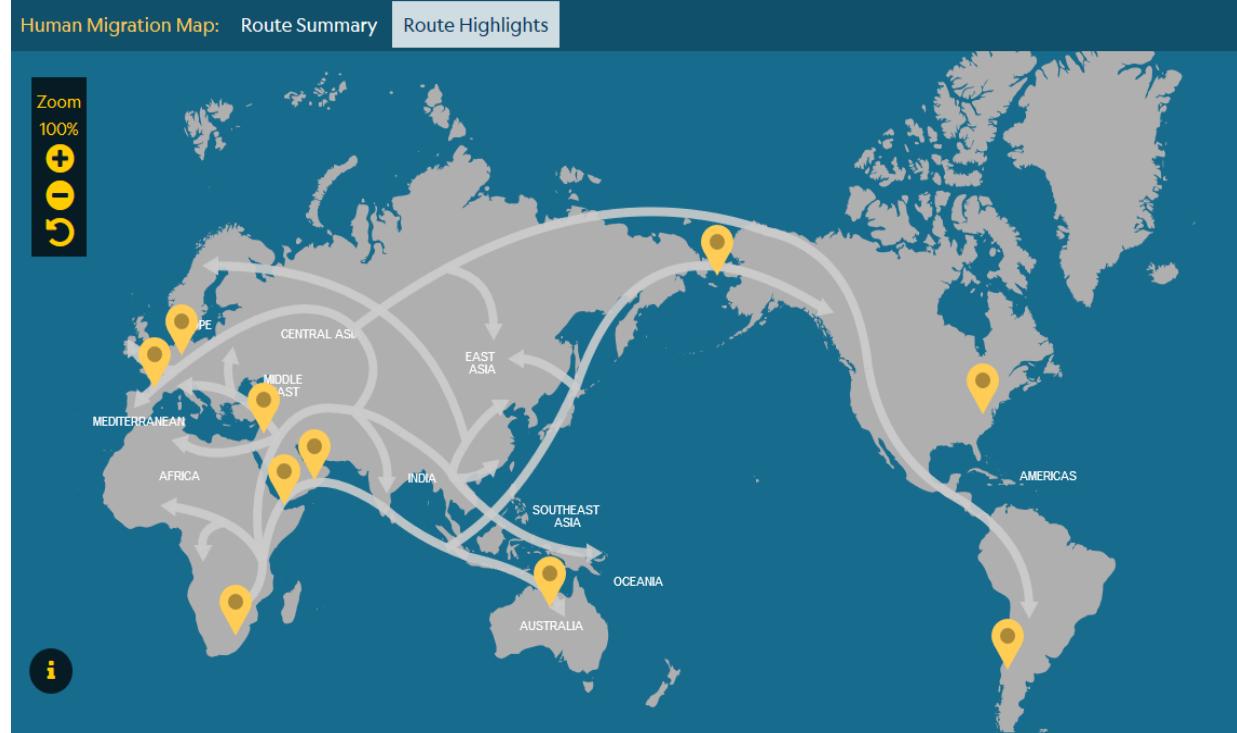
## **Trade and Religion Asia and Northern Africa**

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## Introduction

Humans probably traded even before leaving their cave dwellings. Evidence suggests that women of certain tribes were traded for flint stones. Various tribes gathered periodically for festivities including trading and finding mates. Several cave paintings in South Africa, France, and Bhimbetka (India) (Taçon, 2018), suggest that pre-historic humans started thinking of religion and art. In my view the ideas of religion or God started from two basic premises, fear of death from calamities such as forest fires, floods, earthquakes, predators, and war, and also the awe and wonder of the natural phenomenon such as rainbows, lightning, dawn and stars in the cosmos. The spread of the thoughts and practices of these pre-historic humans probably followed their migration routes out of Africa. Most of these migrations happened on land or a shorter distance across a body of water such as the Red Sea. However, for this paper it is important to note that the migration route from the southern part of the Indian peninsula to Australia dates to 30,000–40,000 years ago. Prehistoric humans reached Australia before they reached Europe. (<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/migratory-crossings/>) Many nomadic primitive tribes used canoes to travel from island to island in archipelagoes, but the voyages from the southern tip of India to Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand so long ago were remarkable. (See Figure 1) The focus of this paper is to trace how the spread of major religions in Asia and northern Africa followed the ancient trade routes on land and sea for thousands of years.

**Figure 1 – Human Migration Map**



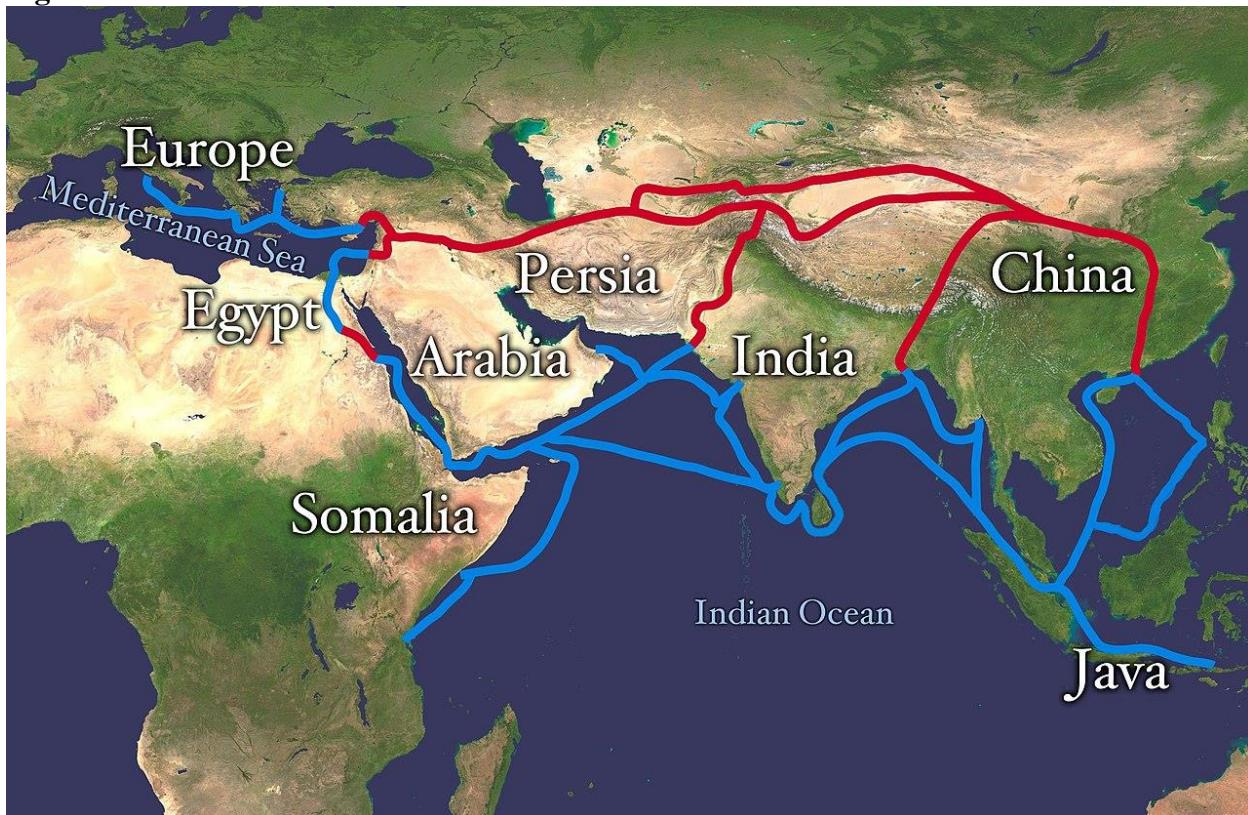
<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/human-journey/>

## Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road

For more than two thousand years, the Silk Road was a network of roads for travel and trade and was instrumental in the dissemination of religious beliefs across Eurasia. When Chinese military control extended as far as the Tarim Basin in 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE, Buddhism was known in Central Asia but not in China or East Asia, Christianity was still more than a century behind, Islam was more than seven centuries in the future, and Daoism was three hundred years away. Many different religions were practiced along the Silk Road. In the Middle East, Gods and Goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon were worshipped. Some worshiped Egyptian Isis and Osiris. Jewish merchants and other settlers who left Israel and Judea established their own places of worship in many places along the Silk Road. Zoroastrianism, which began in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE in Persia (Iran), spread along this trade route and was practiced in other parts of Central Asia (as far as India).

Hinduism, the oldest organized religion, did not spread much beyond India and Southeast Asia. Whereas, the Silk Road helped the spread of Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan, and also in Southeast Asia from India and Sri Lanka as well as from China. Buddhism eventually spread throughout Asia and beyond. (<https://asiasociety.org/education/belief-systems-along-silk-road>)

Figure 2 – Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_India#/media/File:Silk\\_route.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_India#/media/File:Silk_route.jpg)

“The expansion of the great religious traditions was the work of merchants as well as monks; gods traveled in camel caravans, and holy images were carried on rolls of silk.” . . . “When those in power adopted new religions, it often benefited others to follow their lead, securing a network of influence for new religious movements.” (Reilly, 2010, p.222)

Major religions can be categorized in two fundamental groups, proselytizing or non-proselytizing. Proselytizing religions are Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Proselytizing religions actively recruit members from different ethnicities, races, and language groups, based on the belief that their faith (its particular system of belief, forms of worship and promises of salvation) is available to all humans everywhere. Non-proselytizing religions are Hinduism, Judaism, and Shintoism, believe that the religion is established by birth and not by conversion. Conversion sometimes may happen due to marriage, but in some extreme cases even that is impossible; for example, the caste system in Hinduism prohibited inter-caste marriages to maintain the hierarchic structure of the society. Non-proselytizing religions often establish their own places of worship while in a foreign land.

Christianity started spreading both eastward and westward through the efforts of major Christian apostles. Along the Silk Road “Nestorian Christianity spread to Persia, India and China, bringing with it the Syriac language and script (the basis of the writing systems of many Central Asian languages).” (<https://asiاسociety.org/education/belief-systems-along-silk-road>) However, there were many more Buddhists than Christians along the Silk Road. Buddhism also started assimilating some aspects of Daoism which increased its popularity among common people and traders. Many Buddhist scholars started to translate the sacred texts into Chinese, and many Buddhist priests and travelers went from China to India along the Silk Road in search of doctrinal instructions. After the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, Islam spread along the Silk Road through conquest, trade, and preaching. The majority of people along the Silk Road practiced Islam.

Other important trade routes, sometimes referred to as The Maritime Silk Road, across the Indian Ocean reached Southeast Asia, China, South Korea, and Japan spreading cultural and religious influences since around 500 BCE. Various theories are proposed for this trade-based spread of cultural influences. Indian traders and merchants (Vaishya caste) looked to Southeast Asia because of gold. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Indian subcontinent experienced a shortage of gold due to extensive control of overland trade routes by the Roman Empire; whereas, gold was plentiful in Southeast Asia, and more and more traders went to Southeast Asia and eventually influenced the language, art, architecture, religion, and statecraft.

Others point out geographical factors contributing to this phenomenon. Southeast Asian countries are located between the tropics and are similar in climates, flora, and fauna. Many unique products such as, cloves, nutmeg, and mace were highly sought after by international traders. The regularity of monsoon winds, blowing from the southeast during summer and from the northeast during winter facilitated the trading vessels to arrive and leave at regular predictable intervals. “Because of this reliable wind pattern, Southeast Asia became a meeting place for trade between India and China, the two great markets of early Asia.” (Andaya, <https://asiاسociety.org/education/introduction-southeast-asia>)

Andaya (ibid) also emphasizes the geography of mainland Southeast Asia and coastal maritime areas. Long rivers that begin in the highlands separate Southeast Asia from China and northwest India. Another geographic feature is the extensive lowland plains, conducive to rice cultivation, separated by forested hills and mountains. Many tribal groups settled on the hills and mountains, whereas, small settlements began in the lowland areas. Land travel was often difficult due to rugged terrains, but it was easier to move along the coast with boats. "... [I]t is often said that the land divides and the sea unites." Fishing and harvesting other products, such as coral and seaweed provided important occupations along with maritime trade. Coastal areas of neighboring islands often developed similar language, culture, and religious practices. "The modern boarders created by European colonial powers – for instance between Malaysia and Indonesia – do not reflect logical cultural divisions." (Andaya, ibid)

### **Hinduism and Buddhism goes to Southeast Asia**

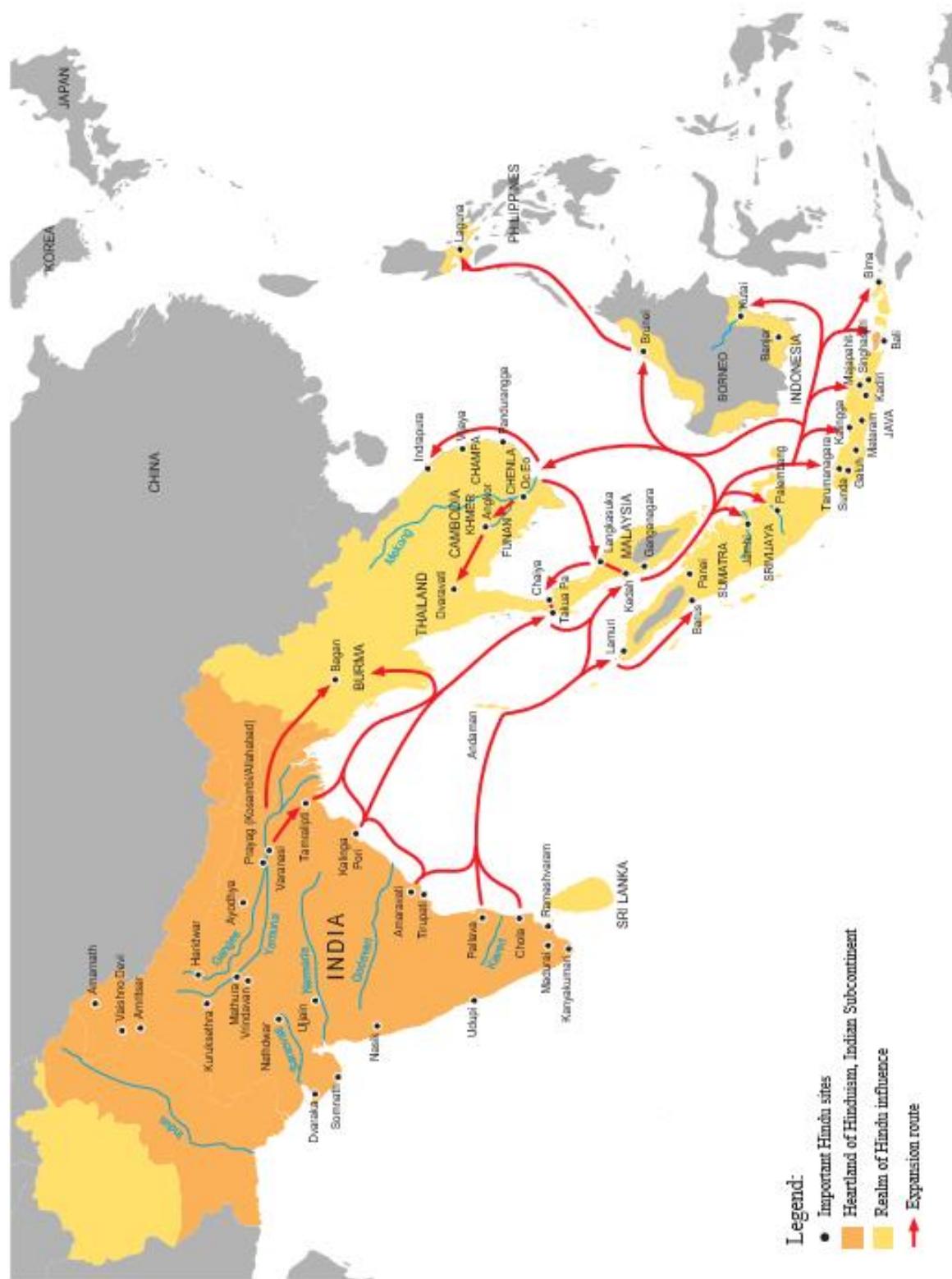
Hinduism and Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia along the maritime trade route via the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. The Kingdom of Champa, what is currently central and South Vietnam, was controlled by a powerful Hindu kingdom (Tamil/Shivaite) since around 192 CE. Champa exported gold, silver, slaves, animals, animal products, and precious woods like eaglewood from its mountainous hinterland. With maritime activities and trade, Champa became a strong naval power. After the collapse of Funan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Chams extended their power southward; however, by the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Champa was a province of Khmers. Vietnamese and Chams were in perpetual conflicts; however, Champa remained an independent state until the last half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when it was finally absorbed by Vietnam. Most of the Hindu Chams emigrated to Khmer. Chams are now a minority in Vietnam, and 60% of them are Hindus. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism\\_in\\_Southeast\\_Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Southeast_Asia)

According to Chinese writing, Funan was a pre-Khmer state which had exercised control over the area of modern day Kampuchea (Cambodia), Central Thailand, and South Vietnam from the 2nd to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. An important center of Funan was Oc-eo, (see Figure 3) a sea-port strategically located on the maritime trade route between China and India but also controlled land routes to the hinterland. Chenla was a successor polity of Funan, which existed from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century until the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. Chenla adopted the Sanskrit epigraphic system of South Indian Pallav dynasty and Chalukya dynasty. The first ruler of Chenla, Viravarman, adopted the idea of divine kingship '*devaraja*' and introduced a syncretistic Hindu God '*Harihara*' which conveys the idea of multiple conceptions of power.<sup>1</sup> His successor continued the tradition to establish the political religious authority.

Langasuka was an ancient Hindu kingdom in the Malay Peninsula at Kedah which was established in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, one of the earliest territorial footholds founded in the Malay Peninsula.

<sup>1</sup> In Hindu pantheon the Trinity includes Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the sustainer and Shiva is the destroyer. Hari is Vishnu and Hara is Shiva. Harihara signifies, a godhead with the power to sustain and to destroy for regenerations. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harihara> for discussion of Harihara and his image in a 6<sup>th</sup> Century cave temple in South India.

**Figure 3 - Greater India**



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Hinduism\\_Expansion\\_in\\_Asia.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Hinduism_Expansion_in_Asia.svg)

From the 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century, Srivijaya was a maritime empire located on the Island of Sumatra in Indonesia that had adopted Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism under a line of rulers from Jayanasa to Sailendras. These Buddhist Malay empires had cordial relationships with China as well as Pal dynasties in Bengal. They had scholarly exchanges with Nalanda University.<sup>2</sup> The cosmic stone mountain of Borobodur, the largest Buddhist monument in the world, was the Sailandra's cultural contribution to history.

The Khmer empire was established by Jayavarman II in 802 CE. Continuing on Hindu 'devaraja' tradition, several powerful rulers reigned until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Buddhism was then temporarily introduced in the royal religious practice but subsequently discontinued. Brahmin priests were brought by the kings who were advisors for religious activities including statecraft. During the Khmer empire political administration, agriculture, hydrology, logistics, urban planning, architecture, literature, and the arts saw an unprecedented degree of development and refinement. Angkor Wat in Cambodia is the largest Hindu temple in the world, dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva. The royal chronology lasted until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is argued that Hinduism was elitist, used by the royal families and bureaucrats. The ordinary people maintained animism and ancestral worship. Finally when Buddhism came, it appealed to common people. However, the success of the Khmer empire should be attributed to the infrastructure development along with art and architecture. Building canals improved waterways navigation and irrigation, building temple complexes employed many artisan, architects, and workers. Such fiscal expansion was possible only with surplus food, tax collection, and prosperity from trade. Multiplier effects of those fiscal policy/expansion also contributed to economic growth. Historians often overlook this aspect. It is still a big source of income from tourism.

Mon kingdoms facilitated Indianized cultural exchange in lower Burma from the 9<sup>th</sup> century until 1539 CE. Buddhism spread to Burma (Myanmar) from India via Kamrup (Assam) as well as from Bay of Bengal and Sri Lanka. From Myanmar, Buddhism went to Western Thailand. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thai people gained independence from Khmer empire and established their own kingdom called Sukhothai which was the precursor for the Ayutthaya Kingdom and Kingdom of Siam. The Sukhothai Kingdom was in many ways a continuation of the Buddhist Mon-Dvaravati civilization and the Hindu Khmer Empire.

In the Indonesian archipelago there were several Hindu and Buddhist Kingdoms from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_India)

- Salakanagara: Western Java, Indianized kingdom (130-362 CE.) established by Indian trader after marrying a local Sundanese princess.
- Tarumanagara: Near modern Jakarta, Purnavarman built a hydraulic project, associated himself with Vishnu, and Brahmin priests ritually secured the project to benefit agriculture and settlement.
- Kalingga: One of the oldest Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in Central Java.
- Malayu: A classical Southeast Asian kingdom around the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> Nalanda was the world's first university where Buddhist Scholars from different countries gathered and studied Buddhist doctrines.

- Srivijaya: A maritime empire centered on the island of Sumatra from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- Tambralinga: An ancient kingdom on the Malay Peninsula (Nagara Sri Dharmaraja) existed from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This kingdom first sent tribute to the emperor of Tang Dynasty in 616 CE.
- Medang Mataram: The kingdom flourished between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Central Java, and Sailendras were the ruling family of this kingdom before being replaced by the Isyana Dynasty.
- Kediri: In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Mataram challenged the supremacy of Srivijaya. Srivijaya destroyed the capital of Mataram early in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. King Airlangga restored the capital and ruled from 1020-1050 CE. After his death the kingdom was split, and Kediri became the new state in eastern Java and was the center of Javanese culture for the next two centuries. Kediri became a strong trading nation with the flourishing spice trade.
- Singhasari: The Kediri dynasty was overthrown by a revolution in 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Singhasari under the rule of warrior-king Kertanegara arose in east Java. He was killed by a prince of the previous Kediri dynasty, who established the last great Hindu-Javanese kingdom, Majapahit. By the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Majapahit controlled most of Java, Sumatra, and Malay Peninsula, part of Borneo, the southern Celebes, and the Moluccas. It even exerted considerable influence on the mainland.
- Galuh: An ancient Hindu Kingdom around the 7<sup>th</sup> century with its capital located in Kawali (near present-day Ciamis City.)
- Sunda: A Hindu Kingdom located in western Java from 669 – 1579 CE.

Sukhothai and Sri Lanka promoted an orthodox form of Sinhalese Buddhism which was popularized over Hinduism. Also, many Muslim Indian traders followed the same trade route and promoted Islam in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In the mainland, Buddhism had a stronghold but much of Malaysia and Indonesia became more Muslim populated. Both of these religions were proselytizing religions, but Theravada Buddhism was firmly established in Thailand, among the ruling elites and the peasant masses. Muslim traders went to Thailand but could not convert many people.

Following this ancient trade route, Hinduism found its way to the southeastern coast of China in Quanzhou and Fujian province. Tamil merchants brought their faith and evidence of temples and Hindu motifs were discovered. Many Hindu Sanskrit texts were translated into Chinese. Some Sanskrit texts, original as well as other translations which were lost in India, have been located in China.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *Jin Qi Shi Lun* is a surviving translation of *Shankhya-Karika*.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism\\_in\\_Southeast\\_Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Southeast_Asia)

## Spread of Islam

With the beginning of agriculture around the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE in west Asia (Fertile Crescent), larger settlements emerged with powers in city-states. Such powers exerted their influence to other cities as well as the pastoralists. With increased agricultural production, inter-city trade particularly of luxury goods flourished. Wealthy businessmen could take advantage of manual labor of others (slaves) to patronize a wide range of arts and crafts, and “few individuals were able to establish territorial monarchies and foster religious institutions with wider appeal.” (Sterns, 1992) Various innovations in statecraft (administrative function and law), writing system, royal deities, coinage, and a standing army with advanced military skills all worked together to strengthen the power of the ruler. Before the Prophet Muhammad, this region of west Asia focused on deities such as Marduk (chief God of Babylon), Isis (Egypt), or Mithra (Persia/Iran).

Muhammad was born in Arabia, which was culturally isolated and economically underdeveloped. Bedouin nomads lived in the arid interior of Arabia in small tribal groups, constantly moving in search of food and water for their flocks and themselves. Bedouins enjoyed some personal freedom unlike societies with settled agriculture. Mecca was an oasis in the Hejaz (a mountainous barrier from Yemen to Sinai Peninsula) and was located at the intersection of two ancient caravan routes. An east-west route connected Africa through the peninsula to Iran and Central Asia. The other northeast-southwest route brought spices from India to the Mediterranean coastal region. Koraysh tribes controlled Mecca and the “rulers organized themselves into syndicates of merchants and wealthy businessmen.” (Sterns, 1992) Mecca also had the Kaaba which had 360 gods and goddesses, and the annual pilgrimage ensured sources of revenue for the merchant class.

Muhammad worked for his uncle in the caravan business. When Muhammad brought his ideas of a new religion, the Koraysh leaders were persecuting his followers. He asked some of his followers to go to Axum. “Aksum was an extensive state, with a farming economy, and deeply involved in trade by the first century AD with the Roman Empire. ... The Axumite civilization was a Coptic pre-Christian state in Ethiopia, from about AD 100-800.” (Hirst, 2017) This was the first contact of Islam in Africa. Eventually, Muhammad and his followers left for Medina, in September 622 known as Hijrah or “the migration”. He was accepted very well in Medina and established a community of believers, or “Ummah”. He returned to Mecca and cleaned the Kaaba of pagan idols. By 632, most of the Arab Peninsula was converted to Islam. After Muhammad’s death, Islam spread very rapidly, through conquest, trade, and preaching.

There were ancient trade routes in North Africa connecting Sahel area as far as the west coast of Africa. Traders brought goods from Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and Algeria to the European market from the Mediterranean coastal region. Berbers were very knowledgeable about these routes because they knew the locations of oases in that vast desert. Gradually settlements began near these oases. The most important traded items were ivory, gold, plants, animals, incense, and salt. Pre-dynastic Egyptians traded with Nubians to the south and oases of the Western Desert and the eastern Mediterranean, Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>, and Zanzibar. Slaves were also

<sup>4</sup> Particularly obsidian were imported from Ethiopia.

traded along these routes.<sup>5</sup> Slaves were brought to serve in the military, domestic and farm work, as well as concubines. From the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Islam spread from Egypt and Sudan on the east, all the way to Mali, Ivory Coast, Cote d'Ivoire, and Niger at the western coast of Africa. "The eastern trans-Saharan route led to the development of the long lived Kanem-Bornu Empire as well as the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires, centered on the Lake Chad area. This trade route was somewhat less efficient and only rose to great prominence when there was turmoil in the west such as during the Almohad conquests." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Saharan\\_trade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Saharan_trade)

The Umayyad Empire conquered much of the Northern Africa and West Africa and Islam followed these trade routes and converted local tribes with military power, differential taxes<sup>6</sup> and preaching. However, many of the converts retained some of their own cultural practices and developed their own brand of Islam, known as "African Islam," a syncretic version.<sup>7</sup>

The Umayyad Empire expanded up to Spain in 711 CE and up to southwest France by 718 CE; however, it could not expand farther north in Europe. Because of Greek aide they could not conquer Constantinople. By the eighth century, Muslims expanded successfully eastward into Central Asia, Turkestan, and as far as the Indus Valley.

Discriminatory practices towards non-Arab converts of Muslims led to the downfall of the Umayyad empire and rise of the Abbasid Caliphate who ruled from 750-1258 AD. After the Mongols sacked Bagdad (Abbasid capital), the Abbasid line of rulers re-centered themselves in the Mamluk capital of Cairo, Egypt in 1261. Even though they had no political power, the dynasty continued to claim authority in religious matters until after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517.

Arab traders frequented the Silk Road, Incense Road, and Spice Road as early as 3000 BCE according to Sumerian records. Jewish traders reached Kochi and Kerala in India as early as 562 BCE after the destruction of the First Temple, and more Jewish traders came as exiles in 70 CE after the destruction of the Second Temple. Muslims came to India in the last years of the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, initially to raid and pillage but soon with the intent of conquering and settling. Nomadic chiefs came in search of booty or for 'crown hunting' to establish a kingdom. Muslim influx often involved violent clashes and desecration of Hindu temples. Historian Richard Eaton (2000) noted that 37 Hindu temples were desecrated from 1234-1518 during the Delhi Sultanate era. They followed Sunni Islam and ruled over large parts of the Indian Subcontinent for 320 years (1206-1526).

In many instances, large numbers of people were converted to Islam at the point of the sword. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Islam became a major force in Indian history. Main carriers of new faith were traders who came to the coastal areas and then moved inland. Sufi mystics started spreading the faith of Islam to common people. They established mosques and schools

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<sup>5</sup> As many as nine million slaves were exported along the trans-Saharan caravan routes.

<sup>6</sup> Non-Muslim had to pay taxes. So, to avoid paying taxes most people converted to Islam. Also, being Muslim had the added advantage of gaining favorable trade deals and securing prestige and position in the bureaucratic establishments. Many Christian captives (after raid or piracy) converted to Islam to gain freedom. (Wiki – Trans-Saharan Trade)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd\\_tsis/hd\\_tsis.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsis/hd_tsis.htm) "Trade and Spread of Islam in Africa"

which often became regional political power centers. Buddhism was in disarray<sup>8</sup> and many Buddhists converted to Islam. Sufi saints also targeted lower caste Indians to convert with the egalitarian message of Islam.<sup>9</sup> Some converted to avoid non-Muslim head tax and to be in favorable commercial or administrative positions. Some were converted by marriage since most migrants were men in those communities.

There were also many cultural and scientific exchanges between these two civilizations. The Arab foothold in Sind since 711 AD allowed such exchanges. Indian music, musical instruments, medicine, number system, statecraft, and alchemy were studied by Arab scholars and disseminated on to the rest of Europe. Even the game of chess came from India and became popular among the princes of the court as well as the common people in the Middle East and Europe.

Mughal Empire ushered with Babur (a Timurid descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan from modern day Uzbekistan) in 1526, and ruled for over 300 years. As their power waned, Maratha and Sikh imperial powers grew over vast regions of the Indian Subcontinent. Eventually European traders, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British landed on coastal areas of India to trade but with the intent of colonizing. Finally in 1858 British Raj took over power and ruled for 200 years.

### **Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia**

Arab traders visited the ports of Southeast Asia for millennia even before they converted to Islam. As discussed before, this trade route across the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, connected China to the east and Mediterranean coasts in the west via Indian ports. Luxury goods such as aromatic wood, and spices like clove, nutmeg, and mace were acquired in the archipelagos of Southeast Asia to be shipped to China and for the European markets.

Just as these trading complexes disseminated Hinduism and Buddhism to Southeast Asia in the earlier centuries, from the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> century Islam followed these trade routes to Malaysia, Indonesia, Borneo, Philippines, and Thailand. Many of these Muslim traders actually came from India. The Muslim conquest of Gujarat in the west and Bengal in the east from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward also contributed to this process. After the collapse of the mighty trading empire of Srivijaya (a Buddhist empire) and decline of Majapahit (a Hindu empire) from the 13<sup>th</sup> century widespread proselytization of Islam began.

Muslim trading centers were being established. Many traders converted to Islam because of the convenience of dealing with Muslim traders in faraway India or Iberian coasts. A promissory note issued in Spain could be accepted in a trading center in Sumatra. Sufi mystics from India came along with the trading vessels and started preaching in coastal areas. They built

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<sup>8</sup> “The destruction of major monastic centers by Central Asian invaders contributed to the disappearance of Buddhism from India in the twelfth century, but it has thrived into the present in its Mahayana and Tantric forms in Nepal and Tibet in its Theravada form in Sri Lanka.” (Ann Murphy, “The Religions of South Asia”, <https://asiاسociety.org/education/religions-south-asia>)

<sup>9</sup> Although social stratification evolved based on the origin of the Muslim; Arabs being highest, non-Arabs, i.e., Persian, Turks etc. were below the Arabs, higher caste Hindu converts came after them, and low cast Hindu converts remained poor, and at the lowest socio-economic category, in spite of egalitarian message of Islam. This also hindered further proselytizing of Hindus in India.

mosques and schools and then traveled to nearby regions to preach the faith. The Sufis were a pragmatic bunch, and the converts were allowed to retain some of the pre-Islamic cultural-religious practices. Women retained a much stronger position in family and society. They could own small businesses; local and regional markets were dominated by female buyers and sellers; and inheritance and lineage followed the female lines, all of which were contrary to the practices of Islam in the Middle East and India. Even some of the pre-Islamic religious beliefs and rituals were assimilated into Muslim ceremonies; for example, Javanese Shadow plays based on Ramayana and Mahabharata (Hindu Epics) were refined “and became even more central to popular and elite belief and practice than they had been in the pre-Muslim era.” (Sterns, 2002) Islam took a similar path of syncretism in Africa. However, when the European trading and colonial interests made inroads in this region, many Imams (Muslim religious leaders) asserted that not following orthodox Islamic practices led to the encroachment of European Colonialism.

Islam reached China more via the Silk Road and had established a big community from Western China as far as in Xian. Islam came to Thailand, but Theravada Buddhism had appeal to both the elite ruling class as well as the populace masses, which did not enable successful large scale proselytizing of Islamic faith. Thailand remained mainly Buddhist with some strong Hindu cultures in the Royal Court among the elites as well as the general public.

Islam started making headway among the Cham after the 10th century AD. By the 17th century, the royal families of the Cham had converted to Islam. Most Cham are now evenly split between being followers of Islam and Hinduism with the majority of Vietnamese Cham being Hindu while the majority of Cambodian Cham are Muslim, though significant minorities of Mahayana Buddhists continue to exist.

According to an Indonesian 15th century record, Princess Daravati, a Cham, converted to Islam, and influenced her husband, Kertawijaya, Majapahit's seventh ruler to convert the Majapahit royal family to Islam. (Maspéro 2002) From the 15th to the 17th century, Muslim Cham maintained a cordial relationship with the Aceh Sultanate through dynastic marriage. This sultanate was located on the northern tip of Sumatra and was an active promoter of the Islamic faith in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>10</sup>

### **Christianity in Asia**

Following the conquest of Egypt by Augustus, extensive trade between the Roman Empire in Europe and the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent existed since 30 BCE. (Shaw 2003) Arab traders frequented various cities of the western coast of India, in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Kerala as early as 3000 BCE. They bought various spices such as pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, turmeric as well as precious stones, cloth, and metals from the Indian subcontinent and sold those along the Mediterranean for European markets and became wealthy businessmen. To maintain their monopoly, the Arabs never wanted to disclose the location or the routes to these spices and told ‘tall tales’ to their European customers. After the acquisition of Ptolemaic Egypt by Augustus in 30 BCE, an extensive trade route connecting the Roman Empire in Europe and the Mediterranean to India was established. The Roman Empire now had a direct connection to Spice Trade that Egypt had established in 118 BCE. (See Figure 4) This trade route also facilitated the arrival of Christianity in India.

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Champa#Hinduism\\_and\\_Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Champa#Hinduism_and_Buddhism)

Figure 4 - Periploos of the Erythraean Sea



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erythraean\\_Sea#/media/File:Periploos\\_of\\_the\\_Erythraean\\_Sea.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erythraean_Sea#/media/File:Periploos_of_the_Erythraean_Sea.svg)

Thomas the Apostle came to Taxila in 43 CE to spread Christianity but was not very successful. Then he came as a member of the crew of an Indian Jewish merchant named Abbanes to his native place in northwest India and was successful in converting many thousands of people including the Indo-Parthian King Gondophares and his brother. In his second mission in the Malabar Coast of Kerala, St. Thomas converted mainly Cochon Jews who arrived and settled in India around 562 BCE after the destruction of the First Temple. These Jews spoke Aramaic (just like St. Thomas who was a Jew) and used Syriac New Testament. Syriac Christianity also spread to Tamil Nadu (Madras), and the India's oldest church, claimed to be the world's oldest existing church structure, was built by Thomas the Apostle in 57 CE. The rulers of Venad (Travancore) granted the St. Thomas Christians 72 rights and privileges which were usually granted only to high dignitaries. These rights included exemption from import duties, sales tax, and the slave tax.

In 1320, a French Dominican missionary Jordanus Catalani, arrived in Surat (Gujarat) and within three years in 1323 his ministry in Gujarat reached Kollam in Kerala. As the first bishop in India, he was also given the responsibility of spiritual nourishment of the Christian community up and down the western coast of India in Calicut, Mangalore, Thane and Broach (North of Thane). In 1453, the fall of Constantinople to the Islamic Ottoman Empire ended the Christian Rule of Byzantine Empire or the Eastern Roman Empire. Trade in Asian goods for

Christian Europe became very difficult as the trade routes to Asia by land were severed. This spurred the impetus for the ‘Age of Discovery’ in search of an alternative sea route to the Indies and Orient.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century came pioneering Portuguese explorers, traders and missionaries in India. In 1497-1499, a Portuguese expedition commanded by Vasco da Gama, reached India, along with Nicolau Coelho and Bartolomeu Dias, the first to reach India by an all sea route from Europe. One of the objectives of these missions was to connect with St. Thomas Christians in the Malabar Coast. Europeans came to know of the St. Thomas Christians in India from the account of Marco Polo’s travel through China, Japan, and India.

In the following years, Portuguese-India Armadas were dispatched annually to India, principally to Goa. In 1510, Afonso de Alburquerque conquered Goa which became the most flourishing of Portuguese colonies in India for 450 years until 1961 when it was annexed in India.

Proselytization in Asia was linked to the Portuguese colonial policy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. After forty years of successful and prosperous trading, missionaries started converting local people to Christianity, led by the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier and supported by the colonial Portuguese government. At the same time, many new Christians migrated to India after the inquisition in Portugal.

The south Indian coastal areas around Kanyakumari were ruled by Paravars who were renowned for pearl fisheries. From 1527, the Paravars were threatened by Arab fleets supported by Muslim supporting Zamorin of Calicut. The Paravars appealed to Portuguese for protection from the Arabs, and it was granted under the condition that the leaders including the whole community will convert to Christianity. The deal was agreed and by 1537 the whole community was declared Christian, after 20,000 Paravars were baptized en masse. The Arab fleet was destroyed by the Portuguese navy at Veladai on June 27, 1538. (Hastings (2000), pp.166-168.) Consequently, Portuguese gained control of the pearl fisheries and a strategic foothold. From 1542, Francis Xavier started converting lower class Tamils to Christianity.

Albuquerque conquered Malacca in 1511, and by 1512 the Portuguese traders reached valuable Spice Islands (Banda and Sunda Islands) and acquired nutmeg, mace, and cloves. In 1511, Ayutthaya Kingdom (Thailand) received a diplomatic mission from Portugal, their first encounter with Europeans. Within five years, Portuguese traders were granted free trade with Ayutthaya Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

A year after reaching the Spice Island, the Portuguese reached China at Tamao in the Zhujiang (Pearl River) estuary. Rafael Perestrello, a cousin of Christopher Columbus, led a small Portuguese Trade mission to Canton (Guangzhou), then under the Ming Dynasty. In 1517, the Portuguese merchant Fernao Pires de Andrade established the first European trading post on the Chinese coast, first in Tamao and then in Canton.

The Ming Dynasty leased the territory of Macau to Portugal as a trading post in 1557, and Macau became the formal colony of the Portuguese Empire. Originally governed by

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<sup>11</sup> Thailand was never colonized by any European power.

Chinese Authority and sovereignty, Portugal got perpetual occupation rights for Macau in 1887.<sup>12</sup>

Nestorian Christianity reached China via the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty with its capital in Xian. After reaching the southeastern coastal area of China, Jesuits reintroduced Christianity. Later, other missionaries from various countries of Europe and America reached China. When all religions were denounced during the Communist Revolution, most missionaries left China, although some local Christian Chinese continued to practice privately without identifying themselves. Religions are still strictly controlled by the government in China.

### Christianity Goes to Japan

Even before gaining Macau as a colony, soon after the first contact with Japan in 1543, Portuguese ships started arriving in Japan mainly with Chinese goods; such as silk and porcelain. The Japanese were very eager to buy these Chinese goods but with a decree from the Emperor of China, trade with Japan was prohibited as a punishment for *Wokou* pirate raids. The Portuguese traders got the golden opportunity to become the intermediaries in this Asian trade. In Japan, such trade was known as *Nanban* trade.<sup>13</sup> After Macau became its colony, the Portuguese government started to regulate trade from Macau to Japan by auctioning monopoly rights to the highest bidder, for the annual “Captaincy”, in effect giving the monopoly right of a single large ship to Japan with goods from China.

In 1549, Saint Francis Xavier arrived in Japan accompanied by Father Cosme de Torres, Brother Juan Fernandez, the Japanese Anjiro, and two baptized Japanese: Antonio and Joane, a Chinese named Manuel, and an Indian named Amador. At that time, Japan was embroiled in civil war, and St. Xavier failed to contact the emperor. From 1551, however, he was permitted to preach by *daimyo* (feudal lords) of the Yamaguchi prefecture in Southwestern Japan. Many feudal lords converted to Christianity. They wanted to be in good terms with the Jesuits who supplied saltpeter to make gun powder. In general, Japanese were very eager to have access to cargoes brought by the Jesuit missionaries.

The financial needs of all the missionary work could not be met by the King of Portugal, so the Jesuits in Japan had to be financially self-sufficient. St. Francis Xavier, the pioneer Jesuit missionary, managed to finance all the missionary expenses through merchant trading. This officially recognized commercial activities between Canton, China and Nagasaki, Japan went beyond the silk market. Macau-Nagasaki trade involved unauthorized goods such as silk fabrics, gold, musk, even military supplies and slaves. Jesuits sometimes got involved in Spanish trade, which was prohibited by the treaty between Spain and Portugal, which also angered other Portuguese traders.

Language was a big problem. St. Xavier used the word *Dainichi*<sup>14</sup> for the Christian God. Many Monks thought Catholicism was a different sect of Buddhism, since Xavier came from

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<sup>12</sup> In 1999 Macau became a Special Administrative Region of China until Dec. 20, 2049.

<sup>13</sup> *Nanban* is a Sino-Japanese word, and literally means “southern barbarian” referring to peoples of South Asia and Southeast Asia. With the arrival of Portuguese traders *Nanban* was used to designate Portuguese traders and subsequent European traders.

<sup>14</sup> In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism *Dainichi* is considered a Primordial Buddha.

India and brought along many Indian Christians with him. As some Monks delved into it further, they realized that Christianity was a rival religion and grew weary of missionaries.

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi unified Japan and as the ruler of Japan was very concerned about the external threat of European Colonialization and became suspicious of the foreign religion. The missionaries were providing military support to the Christian *Daimyo* in western Japan. On Feb 5, 1597, twenty-six Christians were crucified in Nagasaki. Persecution of Christians continued now and then in 1613 and in 1630. On Sept 10, 1632 fifty-five Christians were martyred in Nagasaki.

Tokugawa Ieyasu came to power in 1600 and, like his predecessor, disliked Christian activities even though he supported trade with Spain and Portugal. The Philippines were already under Spanish control. Other rival European Trade interests, such as Dutch and British advised the shogunate that Spain and Portugal indeed intended to establish colonial power in Japan; and Catholicism was their tool. Whereas, British and Dutch traders were solely interested in trade. Being worried about colonization by Iberian powers, The Takugawa shogunate finally banned Catholicism in 1614. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all the European missionaries were expelled from Japan and converted Christians were to be executed. Many Japanese Christians known as “*Kakure Kirishitan*” went hiding.

Dutch traders obtained trading privileges from Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1609. The Dutch were also engaging in piracy and naval combat to weaken Portuguese and Spanish trade in the Pacific. For the next two centuries the Dutch traders were allowed to access Japan from Dejima after 1638.

### Conclusion

This paper concisely highlights the spread of major religions of the world such as, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, to Asia and northern Africa following the trade routes. Of course, after the colonial expansion of European powers such as Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Italy and Great Britain to different continents, entrenchment of colonial master's religion intensified. Further studies of the New World, the Americas, and Southern Africa will reveal a similar path as colonial policies were often tangled with religious conversion.

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