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THE COMING OF INDIAN MUSLIM MERCHANTS TO SARAWAK**Abdul Rahman Deen****INTRODUCTION**

The Indian community in Sarawak is a relatively small minority. Even the population statistics of the state refers to them as just "others". The Indian MusUms, being a subset of this very small group, numbers only a few hundred and it is therefore not surprising that researchers have generally ignored them in their studies. As a result, there is very little information available from them. For example, the Sarawak Gazette which records important news items since 1870 has only six entries that relates directly to the Indian Muslims. This is a pity because although the community is small, it is not in anyway insignificant. It has made several important contributions to the cultural and economic growth of Sarawak and will continue to do so in the future.

This paper is an attempt to trace the arrival of Indian Muslim Merchants and the role they have played in enriching the cultural heritage of Sarawak. In the absence of existing literature on the subject, this paper is based mainly on recollections and opinions of notable elders of the community. As a result there may be many short comings and limitations, but it is hoped that it will serve as a useful spring board for discussions during this workshop and stimulate interest for a proper study on the subject. There is definitely a need for this.

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THE ROLE OF INDIAN MERCHANTS IN BRINGING ISLAM TO THIS REGION

Since early days, Indians have travelled to this region to trade. They came to this region because of the position of the Malay Archipelago along the main trade route between Asia and the Far East and the spice Islands of the Moluccas.¹ These Indian traders also brought along with them their own ideologies and spiritual beliefs. One of the main religion that the Indian traders brought along to these area is Islam.

The first contact between Indian and the Muslim world was between Indian and Arab traders in Southern India. Later in the 8th century when the Arabs conquered the Sindh Area, the rest of India became exposed to Islam.²