

Sheikh Yusuf of Macassar

Sheikh Yusuf was born at Macassar in 1626. He was also known as Abadin Tadia Tjoessoep. He was of noble birth, a maternal nephew of King Biset of Goa. He studied in Arabia under the tutelage of several pious teachers.

The capture of Macassar by the Dutch, made it impossible for Sheikh Yusuf to return to his native land. Thus, when he left Jiddah in 1664 he did not sail to Goa, but to Banten in Western Java. Sheikh Yusuf was never to see Goa and Macassar again. Sultan Ageng of Banten offered the Sheikh his daughter's hand in marriage, and appointed him Chief Religious Judge and his personal advisor.

In 1680, a revolution headed by Pangeran Haji, Sultan Ageng's son broke out in Banten. This revolution was probably engineered by the Dutch. By 1683 Sultan Ageng had rallied enough support and besieged Pangeran Haji in his fortress at Soerdesoeang. The latter appealed to the Dutch at Batavia for assistance. The Dutch welcomed this opportunity. Sultan Ageng was defeated but managed to escape with a party of 5000 of which 1300 were soldiers. Among them was the 57 year old Sheikh Yusuf and the Sultan's two sons, Purbaya and Kidul.

During the resistance against the Dutch, many people died of starvation rather than surrender. It was not long before Sultan Ageng himself was captured. Sheikh Yusuf and Purbaya again escaped and continued their resistance. In September 1683, after a fierce battle in which the Sheikh was wounded, he again managed to escape and fled to Cheribon en route to Macassar. They were overtaken by Lieutenant Eijgel and completely routed. The wounded Sheikh Yusuf again escaped and sought refuge in a little village. He lived there in complete destitution, fearing betrayal. By then, his company had been reduced to a total of 24, consisting mainly of priests and four women.

Sheikh Yusuf was eventually persuaded to surrender on a promise of pardon in 1684. The Dutch never fulfilled their promise and he was incarcerated in the castle of Batavia. At Batavia he was treated kindly. The Dutch however suspected that he would attempt to escape, and in September 1684 he was transferred under guard to the castle in Colombo, Ceylon. While he was detained in Ceylon, requests from the King of Goa were received for his release, on the grounds that his holy presence and religious guidance were needed. By then, Sheikh Yusuf was regarded as a 'Kramat' Saint - for his noble resistance. The requests made by the King of Goa were refused, and the Dutch, fearing that attempts would be made to rescue him, transferred Sheikh Yusuf to the Cape of Good Hope on 27 June 1693.

The voyage to the Cape was not without mysterious events. En route the fresh water supply became depleted and being far away from land, this caused deep concern. When Sheikh Yusuf came to hear of this, he merely put his foot in the sea, and told the men to let down the casks in that spot. When they pulled up the casks, they discovered, to their amazement, that the water was fresh and perfectly good to drink. It could have been that the Sheikh knew that they were near one of the fresh water currents of the coast of Natal. If so, it clearly displays the extent of his exceptional knowledge. Nevertheless, the legend lives on in the oral history of the community and is related with great pride by those who believe in his mystical powers.

When Sheikh Yusuf arrived at the Cape, on the Voetboeg, he was royally welcomed by Governor Simon van der Stel. His Indonesian background necessitated that he and his 49

followers be settled well away from Cape Town. They were housed on the Farm Zandvliet, near the mouth of the Eerste River, in the general area now called Macassar. He received an allowance of 12 rix dollars from the Cape Authorities for support of himself and his party. At Zandvliet, Sheikh Yusuf's settlement soon became a sanctuary for fugitive slaves. It was here that the first cohesive Muslim Community in S.A. was established. This first settlement of Muslims in South Africa was a vibrant one, despite its isolation. It was from here that the message of Islam was disseminated to the slave community living in Cape Town. When Sheikh Yusuf died on 23 May 1699, he was buried on the hill overlooking Macassar at Faure. A shrine was constructed over his grave. Over the years this shrine has been rebuilt and renewed. Today it remains a place of pilgrimage.

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