

# Fighting for Freedom of Faith: Muslim Javanese artillery in The Battle of Blaaubergstrand 1806

Story and pictures by Arshad Gamiet

Thirty-two Muslim soldiers, manning the Javanese Artillery on a windswept beach, dramatically changed the course of Islam in South Africa. Totally outnumbered and outgunned, they stubbornly fought on, firing salvo after salvo

at nearly seven thousand Royal Marines advancing towards them. The main body of Dutch troops under Lieutenant-General Janssens, numbering less than half the British force, was already in retreat. The date was 7th January 1806. The place was Blaaubergstrand [Blue-mountain-beach], across the bay from ➤



السير هوم بوبهام.  
Sir Home Popham.



كرامة الشيخ محمد حسن غيبي شاه.  
Kramat of Shaikh Muhammad Hassan Gaibie Shah.

Cape Town. Robben Island [later to become Nelson Mandela's prison] and spectacular Table Mountain lay beyond the foam-flecked breakers. Anchored in the bay were fifteen British warships with forty other supply vessels, having disgorged their huge fighting force onto the beach. The British commander, Admiral Sir Home Riggs Popham, commanding the invasion fleet, was at first puzzled that the Muslims were fighting so bravely to defend their colonial masters. It seemed to him, almost suicidal. After all, Islam was a banned religion in the Cape colony, for over 150 years. What could the Muslims gain by dying in defence of Dutch rule?

But then the Admiral heard that General Janssens had promised the Muslims freedom of worship, as well as a plot of land in central Cape Town for a mosque and burial site, if they would help him to drive the British back to the sea. So that's why they were fighting with such determination! Popham was deeply moved by the Muslims' courage in the battlefield. Had he not ordered his troops to cease fire, there could well have been a complete massacre. And so, as sovereignty over the Cape colony passed from Dutch to British hands, he offered to fulfil Janssens' promise to the Muslims.

Thus Islām came out of the shadows to be practised freely, and the first ever mosque in Southern Africa, appropriately named Masjid Awwal, was built, a lasting memorial to the courage and valour of a very brave band of Mujahids.

Prior to 1806, life was extremely difficult for Muslims at the Cape. The Dutch were wary of the power of Islam. They had encountered fierce resistance to colonial ambitions in Indonesia. That's why influential political leaders, as well as learned Sheikhs had to be removed far from where they might pose a danger to Dutch interests. So, along with ordinary slaves, many 'Orang Cayen' men of wealth and influence, were banished from their homeland, and brought to Cape Town to stay out of trouble. Or so the Dutch thought. What they did not realise, is that they were really taking potent seeds of Islām out of Indonesia, and planting them in the fertile soil of Southern Africa. Even though Dutch laws severely punished da'wa – Islamic missionary work, - this did not stop those noble souls from teaching Islām to others. The Statutes of India



الطريق إلى مقبرة تانا بارو حيث يرقد توانغ غورو فوق سفن هل.

Gateway to the Tana Baru cemetery, burial place of Tuang Guru, on Signal Hill.

proclaimed that Muslims caught spreading their faith to others faced the death penalty, but if any Muslim wanted to be Christianised they were to be given any help they needed. Indeed, the Dutch so feared the influence of their learned royal captives, that men like Sheikh Yusuf, The Raja of Tambora and the Princes of Ternate were kept in isolation on remote farms, in forests and on Robben Island.

Despite these obstacles, and at great personal risk, small groups gathered in the wee hours of the night, in slave lodges in the forests and mountains, for halaqa [studying The Holy Qur'an] and performing Zikr [melodiously chanting the Names of God].

It must have come as a rude shock to the Dutch authorities, when their first census of the Cape Colony in 1770 revealed that despite their best efforts to control the spread of Islām, more than two-thirds of the non-white population was Muslim!

But events in Europe were to have a profound effect on Dutch attitudes to Islam. There was no Suez Canal and Cape Town had a strategic position on the sea route to the East. Britain was a rising imperial power, and the Dutch knew that invasion was only a matter of time. How could they defend themselves without being sure of the loyalty of their [primarily Muslim] civilian population? It was against this background that Muslims were offered religious freedom and land for a mosque and cemetery. And that's why they fought so bravely at Blaaubergstrand.

The first imam of the Dorp Street mosque, as it

is now known, was Frans van Bengalen [Frans from Bengal] a Javaanse veldpriester or Javanese army chaplain, who also led the Muslims in battle.

Another famous soldier-imam was Kardie Abdussalaam, also known as Tuang Guru, who fought with distinction at the Battle of Blaaubergstrand. Having memorised the entire Qur'an by heart, he left behind several copies of The Holy Qur'an written by his own hand, entirely from memory. Tuan Guru, and other Muslim leaders of his time, lie buried in the Tana Baru [Malayu for New Land] on Signal Hill. This was the land promised to the Muslims for their help in defending Cape Town.

All three sites, Blaaubergstrand, the Awwal mosque, and the Tana Baru, are clearly visible from the viewing terrace at Signal Hill lodge, a halaal hotel situated above the historic Malay Quarter. As you drive around the scenic Cape peninsula, from Robben Island to the vineyards of Constantia, from Oudekraal on the cold Atlantic coast, to Faure on the warm Indian ocean, and back again to Signal Hill, you find neat, brightly-painted Mazars or shrines of the great Muslim leaders who brought Islam to South Africa, three centuries ago. There are 13 such buildings around Cape Town, a constant reminder to the power of faith, and the pervasive influence of Islam in this remote corner of the world. ■

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