

# The Entry of Islam into the Archipelago: Trade Routes and the Spread of Da'wah

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## ABSTRACT

The process of the entry of Islam into the archipelago is an important part of the journey of Indonesian history which took place gradually and peacefully. The spread of Islam was not carried out through military force, but through social interaction that was built between Muslim traders, clerics, and local communities. Trade activities became the initial medium for the spread of Islam, especially in coastal areas that had long been connected to international trade routes. Through these interactions, Islamic values are introduced slowly and accepted by the local community. In addition to trade, Islamic da'wah also develops with a cultural approach that adjusts to the social and cultural conditions of the people of the archipelago. Preachers, including Sufi figures, convey Islamic teachings in a persuasive and accommodating way to local traditions, thus creating a harmonious acculturation process. This research aims to examine the process of entry and development of Islam in the archipelago through trade and da'wah channels, as well as analyze the formation of the Islamic pattern of the archipelago. The research method used is a qualitative approach through literature studies on various historical sources and relevant scientific studies. The results of the study show that the combination of trade, cultural da'wah, and education gave birth to Islam Nusantara which is moderate, inclusive, and adaptive to the diversity of Indonesian society until now.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main religions that has greatly influenced global civilization, including the archipelago region, is Islam. Islam did not arrive in the region by accident, but rather it developed gradually through social, economic, and cultural exchanges between the natives and Muslim immigrants. According to historical records, the archipelago has been an important part of the global trade network connecting China, India and the Middle East since the beginning of the AD era. Because of its location, the archipelago became a gathering place for people from various countries, cultures, and ideologies, who helped spread Islam there. One of the important moments in the evolution of civilization in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, was the introduction of Islam to the archipelago. Islamization occurred as a result of peaceful social and cultural exchanges, not through military conquest. The archipelago has been part of the international trade route connecting China, India, and the Middle East since the early centuries AD. Because of its strategic location, the archipelago is a meeting place for people from various countries, cultures and religions including Islam. According to historians, the interaction of trade between Muslim traders and coastal

inhabitants marked the beginning of the recognition of Islam in the archipelago in the seventh century AD. Through their religious attitudes, morals, and practices, these merchants not only did business but also spread the teachings of Islam. The local community then has the opportunity to gradually understand and accept Islam as a result of this deep and ongoing relationship. The growth of Muslim populations in trade centers and port locations reinforced this process. Along with commercial routes, da'wah has a significant role in the spread of Islam in the archipelago.

Da'wah strategies that are tailored to the socio-economic and cultural conditions of certain communities are used by Sufi academics and leaders. To avoid rejection, Islamic values are conveyed through marriage, education, art and local customs. Islam is able to blend with the culture of the archipelago thanks to this cultural approach, which maintains the unique identity of the community. The entry of Islam has had a profound influence on many aspects of life in the archipelago. Islamic kingdoms emerged in the political arena, either replacing or co-existing with previous rulers. Islam has an impact on traditions, value systems, and literary and artistic progress in the social and cultural realms. Meanwhile, Islam encourages the establishment of educational institutions such as pesantren, which have a significant influence including the moral and intellectual progress of the community. To understand the history of the development of Islamic civilization in Indonesia, it is very important to examine how Islam entered the archipelago through trade and da'wah activities. The entry of Islam into the archipelago is impossible to separate the function of sea trade routes from the spread of Islam to the archipelago. Along with the merchandise, Muslim merchants from Gujarat, Persia, and Arabia also carried religious principles that were evident in their morals, attitudes, and lifestyles. Social interaction was created through extensive and sustainable trade, which allowed for the gradual introduction of Islam to the surrounding communities. The teachings of Islam were accepted without coercion because of the honesty, discipline, and principle of justice shown by Muslim merchants. In addition to trade, the da'wah activities of Sufi scholars and leaders also contributed to the Islamization of the archipelago.

Islam is seen as a teaching that enhances the values of community life rather than as a threat to local customs because of this adaptive style of da'wah, which allows for acculturation between Islamic teachings and archipelago culture. This method is evident in the way art, education, and marriage relationships are used as a means of da'wah. The entry of Islam in the archipelago then had a profound influence on a number of aspects of society. In the political field, the emergence of Islamic kingdoms such as Samudera Pasai, Demak, and Malacca marked a shift in the form of government that was previously rooted in Hindu-Buddhism. Islam influences people's way of life, legal system, language and development of religious education, as well as various other social and cultural fields. These changes show that Islam is not only a religion, but also a cultural force that influences the identity of the people of the archipelago. One of the historical events that has significantly shaped the social, cultural, and religious identity of Indonesian society to date is the entry of Islam into the archipelago. Islam developed gradually through harmonious interaction between the natives and Muslim immigrants, not through military conquest. This process began in the seventh century AD and developed rapidly in the thirteenth century, coinciding with the increase in international trade in Southeast Asia. The archipelago is an important maritime trade route connecting China, India, and the Middle East due to its strategic geographical location. The coastal ports of the archipelago are centers for traders from various countries and cultures.

In this context, Muslim merchants not only participated in trading activities but also introduced Islamic principles, which were evident in their behavior, social interactions, and trade ethics. Islam was gradually introduced as a new religion through close interaction between Muslim traders and local communities. The role of professors and Sufis who actively preached contributed

to the spread of Islam in the archipelago other than through trade. They avoid clashing with deep-rooted local customs by conveying Islamic principles in a culturally sensitive way. The people of the archipelago readily accepted Islam as a result of this culturally focused teaching method. The establishment of Islamic kingdoms, which also served as centers for the spread of Islam and Islamic education, accelerated the process of Islamization. To understand the characteristics of the growth of Islam in Indonesia, it is important to study the entry of Islam into the archipelago through trade and da'wah.

## 2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with the library research method. This method was chosen because the research focuses on historical and conceptual studies of the entry of Islam into the archipelago through trade routes, the spread of da'wah, and the development of Islam in the archipelago. Research data was obtained from various relevant written sources, such as history books, scientific journal articles, previous research results, and academic publications related to the research theme. Data collection was carried out by tracing and reviewing literature that discusses the process of Islamization in the archipelago, both from historical, social, and cultural perspectives.

These sources are critically analyzed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the role of trade and da'wah in the spread of Islam and the formation of the Islamic character of the archipelago. Data analysis was carried out through descriptive-analytical analysis techniques. The data that has been collected is classified according to the focus of the discussion, then analyzed by comparing the various views of experts and historians. This process aims to find patterns, suitability, and differences of views regarding the entry of Islam into the archipelago. Furthermore, the results of the analysis are presented systematically and narratively in order to provide a complete and easy-to-understand picture.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Early Process of the Entry of Islam into the Archipelago

Trade activities are inseparable from the entry of Islam into the archipelago. Because of its abundant wealth, the archipelago attracts traders from China, India, Arabia, and Persia, as well as other countries. To carry out trade, they traveled to the archipelago. Over time, their arrival through the Straits of Malacca expanded and became a major international trade route. The traders traveled to trading centers throughout the Straits of Malacca, including Jepara, Tuban, and Gresik on the island of Java. From there, the journey continues to places such as Banjarmasin, Goa, Ambon, and Ternate, which are known as spice-producing hubs. The people of the archipelago were introduced to the religion and culture of Islam by Persian, Arab, and Gujarati traders who had converted to Islam. Therefore, it can be said that trade relations led to the peaceful introduction of Islam to the archipelago. However, it is impossible to determine "when" Islam was first introduced. This has a lot to do with the geographical location of each region. For example, since the establishment of the Srivijaya Kingdom, the Strait of Malacca has been known as a trade and navigation route. This is reinforced by the fact that some Muslim traders began to arrive in Malacca and Srivijaya as early as the eighth century AD. They use the terms Sribuza, Zabay, and Zabag to refer to Srivijaya.

Most historians agree that Islam was first known in the archipelago in the seventh century AD, coinciding with the growth of international trade routes connecting Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East. Because of its strategic position, Nusantara became the main center for Muslim traders who carried Islamic teachings along with their merchandise. Foreign historical documents,

such as reports from China during the Tang Dynasty describing the establishment of Muslim Arab merchant communities along the coast of Sumatra, include some of the oldest evidence of the arrival of Islam in the archipelago. In addition, the discovery of tombstones with Arabic inscriptions such as the tombstone of Fatimah binti Maimun in 1082 AD in Leran, Gresik provides archaeological evidence about the early existence of Muslim populations in the archipelago. This evidence shows that some people already knew and practiced Islam long before Islamic countries were formed. Several historical interpretations explain the origins of Islam in the archipelago. The Arab narrative claims that starting in the seventh century AD, Arab traders directly brought Islam through maritime trade routes. This argument is supported by the similarities between the Shafi'i legal system used in Mecca and Medina and that practiced by Muslims in the archipelago. The Gujarat theory, on the other hand, claims that Islam entered Gujarat through India in the thirteenth century AD due to the similarities between the Gujarat and Pasai tomb styles.

Islam Nusantara is the understanding and practice of Islam in the archipelago as a result of the dialectic between Sharia texts and local reality and culture. Islam Nusantara is a distinctive form of Islam in Indonesia, which combines Islamic values theologically with local traditions, cultures, and customs in the country (Bizawie, 2015). One opinion states that Islam Nusantara is a superficial form of Islam, meaning that Islam that is understood and interpreted is only limited to the outer layer of its teachings, in the form of rituals and ceremonial frenzy combined with formal Islamic worship activities. This is considered a measure of Islam's excellence, glory, and heroism in its community of adherents (Muhibuddin Hanafiah, 2015). In addition to the previously mentioned, Islam Nusantara is a contextual type of Islam that includes various cultural, artistic, educational, and social dimensions. There has been much discussion about what Islam in the archipelago actually is as a result of this hypothetical analysis. The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language defines "Nusantara" as a term or name for all islands in Indonesia, while Islam is a religion introduced by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Sugono, 2008).

Nusantara is a term that describes the archipelago from Sumatra to Papua. This word comes from Javanese manuscripts around the 12th to 16th centuries as a concept of the Majapahit Kingdom. Meanwhile, in 19th-century English literature, Nusantara refers to the Malay archipelago. Ki Hajar Dewantara used this term in the 1920s as one of the name recommendations for a region of the Dutch East Indies (Van der Kroef, 1951). Anyone who cares about the existence of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (ASWAJA) an-Nahdliyyah within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, with Pancasila as the ideology of national and state life, is expected to benefit greatly from Islam Nusantara, which was started by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Islam Nusantara, as practiced by Muslims in the archipelago, is neither a rival religion nor a minor or 'local' Islam. Regarding Nusantara Islam, the Chairman of PBNU has stated firmly that this is not a new religion but a style of da'wah or a strategy to promote Islam in the archipelago. Said Aqil Sirodj stated that Islam Nusantara is a philosophical idea that influences values, viewpoints, and methods of thinking when considering cultural and anthropological orders, not just geographical terms. (Said Aqil Siroj, 2014). One of the characteristics of Islam in the archipelago is diversity, which is the result of a long conflict between religion and culture, between texts and contexts that reinforce each other, creating a friendly, inclusive, and adaptive Islam (Mustofa, 2015).

### **3.2. Islamic Trade Routes to the Archipelago**

The process of the entry and development of Islam in the archipelago can not only be understood as a purely historical event, but also as a social and cultural process that takes place gradually. The interaction between Muslim traders, scholars, and local communities gave birth to a distinctive pattern of Islam, which came to be known as Islam Nusantara. This term refers to the

understanding and practice of Islam that grows through dialogue between normative Islamic teachings and the local social and cultural conditions of the Indonesian archipelago. Islam Nusantara shows that Islam in this region develops contextually without losing its basic values (Siti Makhmudah, 2019). In this perspective, Islam Nusantara is not understood as a new religion or a deviant form of Islam, but as a cultural da'wah strategy that emphasizes a persuasive and adaptive approach. Islamic values are introduced by taking into account the traditions, customs, and social structure of the local community, so as not to cause cultural conflicts. This kind of da'wah pattern allows for a harmonious acculturation between Islam and local culture, as reflected in the various religious traditions of the people of the archipelago (Ahmad, 2021).

Trade routes played a very important role in the initial process of the entry and development of Islam in the archipelago. Since the beginning of the Middle Ages, the archipelago has been part of an international trade network that connects the Middle East, India, and China. The strategic geographical location makes ports along the coasts of Sumatra, Java, and the eastern region of the archipelago as a stopover center for traders from various nations. In this context, trade not only functions as an economic activity, but also as a medium of cultural and religious exchange, including Islamic teachings (Abdul Karim, 2020). Muslim traders who came to the archipelago brought trading commodities while introducing Islamic values through their daily behavior. Honesty, trading ethics, and social attitudes that reflect the principles of justice and equality attract the attention of local communities. This intense and continuous interaction allows Islam to be known slowly without any coercion. This process shows that trade functions as an effective and peaceful means of da'wah, so that Islam can be well accepted by coastal communities (Nurul Huda, 2021). The Strait of Malacca is the most strategic maritime trade route in the process of Islamization of the archipelago. This route connects trade centers in India and the Middle East with Southeast Asia. Ports such as Samudera Pasai, Malacca, Gresik, Tuban, and Jepara developed not only as economic centers, but also as centers for the spread of Islam. The existence of Muslim communities in port areas accelerates the formation of social and religious networks which then extend to inland areas (Ahmad Faisal, 2022).

Trade routes played a significant role in the beginning of the introduction and development of Islam in the archipelago. Since the beginning of the AD Era, the archipelago has been part of an international trade network connecting the Middle East, India, and China. Its strategic geographical location makes ports along the coasts of Sumatra, Java, and the eastern archipelago an important stopping point for foreign traders. In this context, Muslim merchants carried not only trading commodities but also Islamic values which were reflected in their trading ethics, social attitudes, and religious practices. Intense and sustained interaction between Muslim traders and local communities allowed for the gradual entry of Islam. Muslim merchants are known to be honest, fair, and trustworthy in their economic activities, which has led to the interest of the locals in the teachings of Islam. Through close social relationships, such as trade partnerships and marriages with the local population, Islam began to be known and accepted without any element of coercion. This process shows that trade functions as an effective and peaceful means of da'wah. The Strait of Malacca is the most strategic maritime trade route in the process of Islamization in the archipelago. This route connects trade centers in India and the Middle East with Southeast Asia. Ports such as Samudera Pasai, Malacca, Gresik, and Tuban developed into economic centers and places for the spread of Islam. The existence of Muslim communities in coastal areas accelerated the formation of social and religious networks, which then extended to the interior. In addition to the Strait of Malacca, trade routes in the eastern archipelago also played a role in the spread of Islam. The Maluku region, which is rich in spices, is a major destination for Muslim traders from various locations. From these spice-trading centers, Islam spread to areas such as Ternate, Tidore, and its surroundings. The process of Islamization in this region shows the close relationship between global economic interests and the



development of Islam at the local level. Thus, trade routes act as a meeting space between nations that allow the exchange of values and beliefs. Through trading activities, Islam was introduced as a teaching that upheld ethics, justice, and social order. The pattern of spreading Islam that took place peacefully through trade routes then formed the character of Islam in the archipelago as a moderate, inclusive, and able to adapt to local culture.

### **3.2. Spread of Islamic Da'wah**

In addition to through trade routes, the spread of Islam in the archipelago also takes place through da'wah activities that are carried out peacefully and contextually. Islamic da'wah is not conveyed by force, but through a social and cultural approach that adjusts to the conditions of the local community. Sufi scholars, converts, and Sufi figures play an important role in conveying Islamic teachings in a persuasive method, so that Islam can be accepted as a teaching that carries the values of goodness and peace (Ahmad Zainul, 2020). The cultural approach of da'wah is the main feature of the spread of Islam in the archipelago. The preachers did not necessarily erase local traditions, but filled them with Islamic values. The media of art, customs, and local culture are used as a means of da'wah, such as the use of performing arts, oral traditions, and socio-religious rituals. This method allows for acculturation between Islam and local culture, so that Islam develops without causing meaningful social conflicts (Siti Aminah, 2021). In addition, the marriage route is also one of the important means in the spread of Islamic da'wah. Marriages between Muslim merchants or preachers and local communities strengthened social ties and expanded the influence of Islam in the surrounding neighborhood. From this relationship, local Muslim communities were formed which became the center of the spread of Islam in their respective regions. Over time, these communities developed into centers of Islamic education and da'wah. (M. Rusli, 2022). Education also has a strategic role in the process of Islamic da'wah in the archipelago. Traditional Islamic educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools function as centers for religious teaching as well as moral and social development of the community. Through a community-based education system, Islamic teachings are continuously instilled in the younger generation. Pesantren not only produce individuals who understand religious teachings, but also form social characters based on Islamic values (Nur Kholis, 2023).

The spread of Islamic da'wah in the archipelago takes place through a long and layered process, in line with the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the local community. Islamic da'wah is not conveyed through a confrontational or coercive approach, but through a persuasive strategy that adapts to the conditions of the plural people of the archipelago and already has a strong belief system and local traditions. Preachers understand that the success of da'wah is highly dependent on the ability to adapt Islamic teachings to the socio-cultural context of the people who are targeted by da'wah

The role of Sufi scholars and figures is very prominent in the process of spreading Islam in the archipelago. A sufistic approach that emphasizes the spiritual aspects, morals, and exemplary behavior is an effective means of introducing Islam. The Sufis convey the teachings of Islam by emphasizing universal values such as honesty, patience, simplicity, and compassion. This approach makes Islam understood as a teaching that guides moral and spiritual life, not as a threat to pre-existing local beliefs and cultures (Mustofa, 2021). In addition to a spiritual approach, Islamic da'wah is also carried out through social and cultural channels. Local traditions are not erased, but are filled with Islamic values so that an acculturation process occurs. Art media such as puppet performances, oral literature, traditional ceremonies, and social rituals are used as a means of conveying Islamic messages. This strategy makes Islamic teachings easily accepted by the community because they are conveyed through cultural forms that are familiar in daily life (Siti Aminah, 2021).

The role of Sufi figures in the spread of Islamic da'wah is also very significant. A sufistic approach that emphasizes exemplary morality, spirituality, and ethical values makes Islam more acceptable to people who previously had local faith traditions. The Sufis convey the teachings of Islam by emphasizing the moral and spiritual aspects, so that Islam is understood as a teaching that soothes and guides social life. This approach strengthens the character of Islam in the archipelago as a friendly, moderate, and inclusive Islam. Thus, the spread of Islamic da'wah in the archipelago takes place through various complementary channels, such as trade, culture, marriage, education, and Sufism. This adaptive and peaceful pattern of da'wah is the main factor in the success of Islamization in the archipelago and forms the character of Indonesian Islam that is contextual and firmly rooted in people's lives.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The entry of Islam into the archipelago is a complex historical process and lasts over a long period of time. Islam did not exist through conquest or coercion, but rather developed gradually through intense interaction between Muslim traders, preachers, and local communities. Maritime trade routes became the starting door for the introduction of Islam, especially in the coastal areas, where Muslim traders introduced Islamic values through trading ethics, honesty, and social attitudes that reflected the principles of justice and equality. This sustained social interaction allows local communities to know and accept Islam voluntarily. The development of Islam in the archipelago is further strengthened through da'wah activities carried out with a cultural and contextual approach. Sufi scholars and leaders convey the teachings of Islam by considering the social and cultural background of the local community. Da'wah is not done by removing existing traditions, but by integrating Islamic values into cultural, educational, artistic, and social life practices. This kind of da'wah pattern results in a harmonious acculturation process and prevents conflicts between religious teachings and local culture. The long process of Islamization gave birth to a distinctive Islamic style known as Islam Nusantara. Islam Nusantara is a manifestation of the dialogue between normative Islamic teachings and the socio-cultural reality of Indonesian society. This Islamic style displays a moderate, inclusive, and tolerant character, and is able to adapt to diversity without losing the substance of Islamic teachings. Islam Nusantara not only functions as a religious identity, but also as a framework of values that contributes to building a harmonious and just social life. Thus, the understanding of the process of the entry of Islam through trade and da'wah channels, as well as the development of Islam in the archipelago, provides a complete picture of the character of Islam in Indonesia. Islam in the archipelago has developed as a peaceful, adaptive, and contextual religion, and has strong relevance in responding to the challenges of a pluralistic modern society. This conclusion confirms that Islam Nusantara is the result of a dynamic historical and cultural process, as well as an important foundation for the formation of Indonesian Islamic identity to this day.

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