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RESEARCH PAPER

Rethinking Islamization in Southeast Asia: Maritime Networks, Political Authority, and Uneven Religious Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study explains why Islamization unfolded unevenly across maritime Southeast Asia, delimited to six cases: Samudra-Pasai, Malacca, Aceh, Java, Brunei–Sulu, and Ternate–Tidore. Single-cause explanations attribute Islamization to trade, royal conversion, or Sufi teaching. Yet societies sharing the same maritime networks experienced markedly different religious outcomes. This qualitative comparative-historical study uses published scholarship and edited sources. Its population comprises Muslim polities of the Malay-Indonesian world. Cases were purposively selected for contrasting relationships among maritime circulation, religious transmission, political authority, and localization. Sources were dated, separated from later interpretation, and compared systematically. Maritime contact created opportunities but did not equal conversion. Court patronage did not demonstrate population-wide change. Durable Islam required reproduction through teachers, texts, and local practice, while uneven documentation shapes apparent differences. Future research should use paired case studies with comparable evidence. Archaeology and manuscript studies should extend evidence beyond courts and ports.

KEYWORDS Cultural Localization, Islamization, Maritime Networks, Political Authority, Religious Transmission

Introduction

The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia is one of the most important religious and cultural changes in maritime history. Islam was introduced into a variety of political, social and cultural settings in the region from early Muslim contacts to the trading networks of the Indian Ocean, the formation of Islamic states and the long-term presence of Muslim communities (Reid, 1993; Hall, 2011). The narrative of the spread of Islam to Southeast Asia is, however, not one-way and does not follow a single path or a general "model" of conversion. Previously, historical figures gave little consideration to the sea as a vehicle for the spread of Islam to Southeast Asia, and their emphasis was on trade. Earlier on, trade was more often than not overemphasized as one of the main routes of Islamization in Southeast Asia. As the commercial routes developed between Arabia, Persia, India and Southeast Asia, merchants, ideas and religious practices expanded to make up significant trading regions (Reid, 1993; Prange, 2009). The port cities such as Aceh and Melaka, as well as other coastal centres, became vital locations for Muslim communities to develop and engage with the local communities.

However, the presence of maritime contacts alone cannot explain why in some places, Islam spread rapidly, whereas in other places it spread slowly and sometimes not at all. Another important explanation is that of religious education and the Islamic intellectual networks. Scholars, teachers and Sufi networks in Southeast Asia were also effective

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conduits for knowledge transmission and reproduction of Islamic knowledge (Johns, 1995; Azra, 2004). The initial interaction of the trading community and later on, the teaching and writing, and scholarly activities with Muslims were accepted and spread the teachings of Islam. But the existence of Islamic networks of knowledge does not imply many converted nor much social change.

The relationship between the spread of religion and the emergence of institutions and their local acceptance needs to be explored. The other significant factor of Islamisation is political control. Focusing on the application of Islam in the policies of rulers and courts would be helpful in improving the relationship of diplomacy, political legitimacy and institutionalization. Political institutions were introduced to Melaka, Aceh and elsewhere; they had a role to play in the spread of Islam (Ricklefs, 2008; Reid, 1993). The spread of Islam among the elite, however, did not necessarily manifest itself on a popular level in religious activity. In many instances, the Islamization evolved over time, as a result of interaction and negotiation between the political, religious and cultural systems.

In addition, there was a process of adaptation and localization of Islam in the Southeast Asian context. Islamic tradition did not just simply sit atop the existing traditions, but were woven into the fabric of the local cultural identity, social network and traditions (Ricklefs, 2008; Ricci, 2011; Ghani, Ahmed, & Muzaffar, 2017). It is this that makes Islam so diverse in Southeast Asia and connected to the wider Islamic intellectual and religious community in Asia. It is, therefore, inappropriate to view Islamization in Southeast Asia as a linear process, as a result of one factor, such as trade, missionary activity or political conversion. But it is not just a simple historical process: it is a process of change, a consequence of entangled, yet opposing mechanisms. Maritime networks helped to facilitate contact, religious institutions to facilitate learning, political institutions to facilitate the authority, and other local communities to shape Islamic ideas in their own local contexts. The purpose of this article is to further elaborate on the concept of connected but uneven change, as a way to try to explain these divergent historical processes. The framework does not make the distinction between the phases of Islamization of maritime flow/circulation, religious education and political power and local practice. They are rather viewed as processes that coexisted at the same time, and that more or less existed under certain historical circumstances.

The article contributes to the scholarship in the following ways: It is being employed to refute single factor explanations which exclude conversion in the other contexts, such as trade or missionary activity, of Islam. Second, it provides the potential for cross comparison in the study of the variety of Islamic institutions and practices in societies connected by sea routes. First, it is a story of negotiation between worldly Islamic connections and local historical experiences in the case of Islamization in Southeast Asia. Islam was absorbed by a variety of societies as a result of Muslim contact with Asian trading networks from the early centuries to the rise of Islamic political centres and longstanding Muslim communities (Reid, 1993; Hall, 2011).

Islam's establishment in Southeast Asia, however, did not occur in one way and won't fit into one uniform model of religion. In the past, sea trade has been the emphasis in explaining the arrival and spread of Islam in the area. Trading in the Indian Ocean trade network stretched from Arabia to Persia and India, through a long network of traders, ports and commercial exchanges. These sea-links rendered significant areas for settlement by Muslims, cultural interaction and the movement of religious thoughts (Reid, 1993; Prange, 2009). Muslims in port cities, such as Aceh and Melaka, and other coastal centres began to gain significant influence in the new religious and political movements and their relations with the local communities. However, the impact of

maritime connections on the various pathways of Islamization in Southeast Asia can hardly be overemphasized.

Muslim contact did not necessarily result in the same results. Some areas were transformed into strongholds of Islamic states and traditions, others were areas of Islamization, selective Islamization, or localized expressions of Islam. Thus, the presence of Muslim merchants, trading communities, or early Islamic influences does not necessarily mean that there was a lot of conversion or social change. Another dimension of the understanding of Islamization is the religious transmission. Islamic scholars, teachers and Sufi networks also had important roles in the propagation of Islamic knowledge, the development of educational traditions and in linking the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and the greater Islamic intellectual network (Johns, 1995; Azra, 2004). These networks allowed the passing on of Islamic beliefs and practices from one generation to the next. However, the pace of the development of Islamic institutions in Southeast Asian societies does not have to be attributed to religious learning. Islamization also was influenced by political authority. Islamic rule and court were sometimes accompanied by better political legitimacy, diplomacy and institutional development.

Islamic sultanates signaled the potential of political institutions to facilitate the spread of Islamic institutions and practices (Reid, 1993; Ricklefs, 2008). But the political adoption did not always lead to the immediate change of religious life in the wider populations. In many instances, Islamization was an ongoing process, which developed through the interactions of rulers, religious specialists, and the local communities. Furthermore, there was an aspect of adaptation and cultural negotiation in the process of Islamization in the Southeast Asian region. Islam did not present itself as an opposition to and alternative of the prevailing tradition, but at times was incorporated into the prevailing socio-cultural context of social relations and cultural life and local identities (Ricci, 2011; Ricklefs, 2008). The diversity of Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia can be explained by this process, but it simultaneously established an interconnection to the wider Islamic networks.

In this article, the central research question is therefore how to explain the differential history of different societies that shared maritime networks in the process of Islamization. The article contends that Islamization cannot be seen as a linear process triggered by one specific reason, e.g. trade, missionary activities or political conversion. Rather, it must be viewed as a more complex process—a more dynamic and uneven process of change in which, maritime connectivity provided opportunities for contact, religious learning facilitated transmission, political institutions established legitimacy and local communities influenced Islamic practice in their own historical settings.

Literature Review

In the discussion of the geographical origin of Islam an effort was made to prefer the geographical region of Arabia, Persia, Gujarat, Bengal or other region of Indian Ocean. Different points in this discussion are represented by Arnold (1913), Al-Attas (1969) and Drewes (1968). Every line of trade is a place of exchange for traders, objects, teachers and ideas, and such a single origin story is not enough for an entire region. The commercial histories stress the importance of the involvement of the ports of Southeast Asia in these older Asian systems, not their passivity as a destination (Van Leur, 1955).

Historical specification of the Sufi hypothesis is also required. While Sufi traditions were identified as being important for interpretation by Johns (1961), a later reconsideration (1995) cautions against using later texts to infer the identities and activities of earlier missionaries. Not necessarily the literary works of the Malay Sufi (polity-to-polity) and the networks of ulama in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries can be credited with the original adoption of Islam in each of the polities, although the latter is found to be rich with religious and intellectual activity (Al-Attas, 1970). The distinction between initial

conversion and transmission is therefore not only a conceptual one, it's also a demonstrable one.

There are other differences that can be seen in the histories of political authority and law. Unlike the surrounding, which could be automatically and uniformly changed in population, courts could patronise scholars, religious officers and change public identities without uniform change in population (Milner, 2008). The changes in the law were not progressive, but rather in parallel to adat and other traditional rights (Hooker, 1984). The study of the issue of localization and translation of texts in Malay and Javanese language continued over time showed that the process of localization is not passive borrowing of the words, but is an active process of translation (Braginsky, 2004).

These methods do not necessarily have to be considered as alternative explanations in all situations. The more challenging question is about the evidence for each claim. Local people may not be converted, but Muslim Merchant Quarter. A royal chronicle can be used to tell things which do not normally seem to be people's beliefs, including information about legitimacy and political memory. The texts provide insights into what the learned community wrote and discussed, but generally few insights into households without access to writing. While the article compares these sources, it is also essential to also take note of the different limitations that can be associated with them (Lambourn 2008).

Previous studies have already thrown considerable light on the Islamization issue in the Southeast Asian region, on the trade in sea and other foreign relations, on the political control and on cultural adjustment. In the field of maritime history, the importance of commercial relationships and mobility in providing opportunity for Muslim interaction has been demonstrated, and in the field of Islamic scholarship, the importance of religious teachers, Sufi networks and intellectual exchanges in facilitating the transmission of Islamic knowledge has been established (Reid, 1993; Johns, 1995; Azra, 2004).

Similarly, studies on the history of politics have illustrated the extent to which rulers and Islamic states contributed to the institutionalization of Islam in different parts of Southeast Asia (Ricklefs, 2008). Other studies have been carried out on how Islam was localized and accommodated into pre-existing cultural contexts, which has demonstrated that Islamization is not a simple process of cultural erasure, but rather a negotiation and accommodation process (Ricci, 2011).

These, however, are significant contributions, but there are also a number of analytical points to note. First, there are numerous studies that examine the different facets of Islamization in isolation, such as the dimension of trade, the dimension of Sufi networks, the dimension of political authority, the dimension of local culture, and others. This makes it challenging to describe the interactions of these various mechanisms, and how they resulted in different outcomes in history.

Secondly, some of the theories, which were previously used, have difficulty in describing various forms of religious change. The evidence for Muslims doesn't always mean that they have been converted; political adoption doesn't always mean social change; and religious knowledge doesn't always mean institutional continuity. It is therefore important to have a more coherent system of explanation as to how these processes were connected, but not equally well developed in different societies.

Third, while Southeast Asia was linked together by large networks of maritime connectivity, connectivity brought about different forms of Islamic development. In some areas, Islamic political institutions were established, in others local, selective or slow Islamization took place. These differences need to be further explored in comparative studies.

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by conceptualizing a new idea of connected but uneven change as an analytical concept to account for Islamization in maritime Southeast Asia. The framework does not show Islamization as a linear and sequential process, but rather a process in which multiple mechanisms of Islamization (maritime, religious, political and local social) acted in certain historical instances, resulting in different outcomes.

Conceptual Framework: Four Dimensions of Islamization

From Single-Origin Explanations to Connected Maritime Histories

Issues of the origin of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian world have been debated from different perspectives, such as those centered on Arabia and Persia, Gujarat and Bengal, and other points of the Indian Ocean. The contributions of Arnold (1913), Al-Attas (1969) and Drewes (1968) are significant in this discussion. Questions of geographical origin are of interest in certain inscriptions, texts, or communities. Maritime Southeast Asia as a whole suggests that more than a corridor of transmission is involved, one that is instead marked by the intersecting paths of merchants, objects, teachers, and texts. It was not Muslim networks that created the region, it was part of longer-distance commercial relations and Southeast Asian actors were the agents of these networks and not the beneficiaries of them alone (Van Leur, 1955; Hall, 1981; Hall, 2011).

It is not suggested that trade was not significant. Maritime circulation facilitated repeated opportunity for contact, migration and settlement, exchange and political interaction. The analytical caution is more subtle: an opportunity for interaction is created by a documented route or a merchant settlement, but isn't an argument about the extent to which people were converted locally. (Wade, 2010; Lambourn, 2008).

Religious Transmission and the Problem of Retrospective Inference

Teachers, literature, devotional practice, and scholarly networks are all highlighted aspects of Sufism and Islamic learning in the literature (Johns, 1961, 1995; Al-Attas, 1970). The scholarship is significant to the study of the possibility of social relevance of Islamic knowledge. In contrast, it is incorrect to infer the later Sufi literature and the early modern scholarly networks onto earlier times. For instance, Azra (2004) traces extensive links in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between scholars from Malay-Indonesia and the city of Mecca and Medina. No such networks alone do identify the teachers or mechanisms that might have been responsible for the earliest local conversions, but they are good evidence of intellectual circulation and institutional development in the early modern period.

Riddell (2001), who focuses on texts, institutions, and responses rather than on an individual missionary actor, is particularly helpful in considering the transmission process. This separation is useful for the present study as it allows for the separation of evidence of religious learning from evidence of initial conversion. The stronger the transmission argument in the context of manuscripts, named teachers, institutions, patronage and community practices, the more robust it is. If the claim is only known through later intellectual evidence, then it should be restricted to the historical phase for which there is evidence.

Political Authority, Legitimacy, and Institutionalization

History has shown that rulers had the capacity to influence the institutional context of Islam. Muslim courts may grant to mosques, scholars, legal officers, education, diplomatic relation and new political titles. The development of Muslim polities, thus, became relevant to the institutionalization of religion (Ricklefs, 2008; Reid, 1993; Milner, 2008). The problem

with the visibility of courts is a methodological one, however, since the mundane religious activities of houses are less apt to leave traces in chronicles or inscriptions.

The importance of institutional interaction is also pointed out by Islamic law.Islamic law also demonstrates the importance of institutional interaction. Hooker (1984) demonstrates that the legal norms in Southeast Asia are often negotiated with adat and do not necessarily supplant it. Political institutionalization is then more usefully viewed as a mediating variable which might be a source of resources, known roles and institutional support, than as an adequate explanation for mass conversion.

Localization, Vernacularization, and Social Reproduction

Here, localization means how Islamic ideas and practices became expressible and reproducible in the specific linguistic, cultural and institutional contexts. Malay and Javanese were languages of religious communication and Jawi linked Malay writing with other Islamic textual worlds (Braginsky, 2004; Ricci, 2011). Therefore, translation was not a "passive transfer of vocabulary", but rather interpretation and adaptation to local genre and audience.

This issue becomes of special historical significance in Java. Muslims of the coast have grown up alongside strong Javanese court, literary and ritual traditions. Ricklefs (2006, 2008) charts a long process in which political identity, religious identity and pre-existing cultural forms played together. Similarly, Woodward (1989) and Florida (1995) have shown us the importance of thinking of local Islamic forms as historically contextualized rather than simply as incomplete versions of a common Islam.

This is also true of architecture, customary law, marriage, burial, naming, custom of eating and drinking, schooling and community habits. Royal events are usually more apparent in the surviving documentation than are these forms. Some historians thus view their low visibility as an indication that they were not widespread, and their difficulty of detection should not be confused with the absence of them (Lambourn, 2008; Feener, 2010).

Material and Methods

This study is of a qualitative comparative historical type that uses published scholarship and edited historical sources. It does not conduct a systematic review and is not a report of new archival discoveries, field surveys or quantitative measures. The main source of evidence are inscriptions and material evidence, the interpretations of historians, travel accounts, Malay chronicles, Portuguese descriptions, literary and scholarly studies, and works on Islamic intellectual networks (Hill, 1960; Lambourn, 2008).

Case Selection

The selection of the cases was motivated by the contrast of different historical relationships between maritime circulation, political institutions, religious learning and local cultural forms as well as the extent of the available scholarship for comparative interpretation. Samudra-Pasai is an early example of the Muslim king rule in northern Sumatra. There is better evidence for later political and scholarly institutions in Aceh. In particular, Malacca is very valuable for analyzing the relationship of commercial centrality and court identity. Java has a long history of contact between the Muslim communities on the coast, court culture, and vernacular literary genres. Brunei and Sulu offer a similar, but different, dynastic and maritime history. The dynamics of Muslim affiliation and spice trade and political conflict are illustrated by Ternate and Tidore. A more detailed analysis would be beneficial, but this has not been done here, and Patani and Cham communities are only included as limited contrasts.

Four Analytical Dimensions

Table 1
Analytical Dimensions and the Limits of Inference

Dimension	Operational meaning	What it can establish	What it cannot establish alone
Maritime circulation	Documented movement and settlement within commercial and navigational networks, including ports, merchants, repeated exchange, and residence.	Opportunities for contact, movement, settlement, and connection among ports.	The beliefs of all local inhabitants or population-wide conversion.
Religious transmission	Identifiable teachers, texts, manuscripts, schools, mosques, scholarly links, and instructional institutions.	Transmission of Islamic knowledge and institutional learning in documented settings.	The identity of undocumented early missionaries or the scale of initial conversion in the absence of supporting evidence.
Political authority	Muslim rulers, courts, offices, patronage, legal institutions, diplomatic ties, and sultanate structures.	Political affiliation, patronage, and institutional support for Islamic practices.	Immediate or uniform conversion beyond political elites.
Localization	Vernacular religious texts, language, architecture, adat, ritual accounts, and community-level reproduction.	Local forms of Islamic expression and evidence of social embedding.	A uniform or irreversible change in belief across a population.

Evidence Rules and Comparative Procedure

The comparison takes place in three phases. The type and the approximate date of a source are determined. Secondly, the claim, which is supported by the source, is separated from later academic interpretation. Third, whether a temporal, social or institutional relationship between two or more processes can reasonably be demonstrated. A more robust interpretation is given when there is overlap between independent sources and studies. If there is conflicting evidence or no evidence, the conclusion is expressed tentatively. There are no numerical ranks for the four dimensions. Given the diversity of source base, it is inappropriate to make blanket claims of one mechanism being "stronger" than another. The framework is therefore more of an interpretation than a prediction. It doesn't assume that all cases involve a specific sequence of enabling conditions, mediating institutions and observable outcomes; it merely differentiates among them.

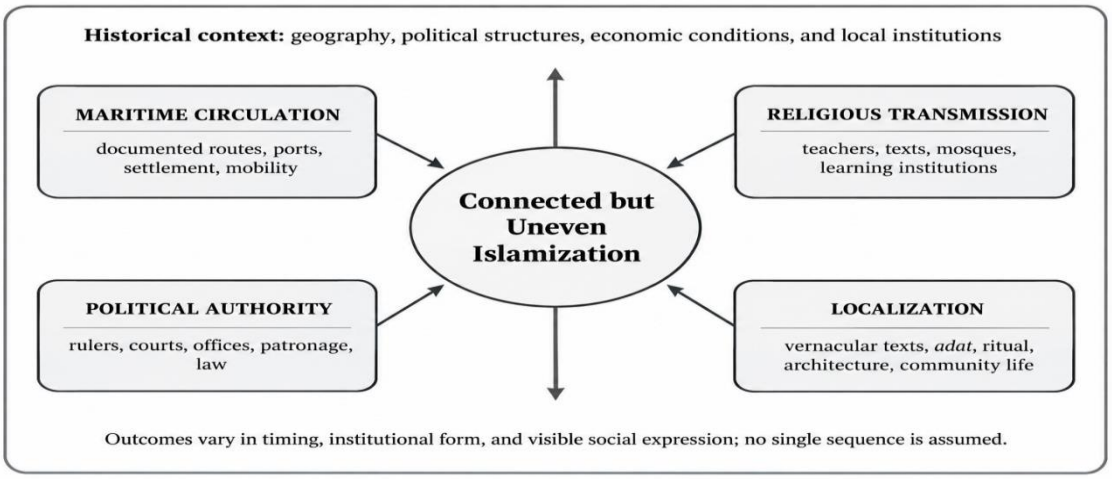


Figure 1. Analytical framework for Islamization as connected processes with uneven historical outcomes.

It is important to note that the four dimensions are analytical domains; maritime circulation is the domain of conditions of contact, religious transmission is the domain of learning processes, political authority is the domain of institutional support, and localization is the domain of processes in which Islamic practice becomes locally reproducible.

The concept of the framework is that maritime circulation, religious transmissions and political authority and localization are all analytical processes that take place at the same time. A commercial settlement could provide a local social base for later teaching; a ruler might provide patronage for religious learning; established communities might provide scholars; and vernacular texts might provide enhancement of connections to wider intellectual worlds. These relationships are not necessarily sequential! The framework is not intended to be evidence of any particular historical event, but rather a way to comparison.

Documentary Inequality and Limits

The existing archival collection is somewhat disjointed in its structure. These descriptions in Europe are as much economic and political as they are religious; royal chronicles overlook the mundane and highlight dynastic memory; inscriptions include the approved or celebratory statement; and manuscripts reflect the communities that were literate. Tombstones and names do not necessarily represent a population survey but can signify the presence of Muslim individuals or groups (Lambourn, 2008).

This is particularly crucial for claims pertaining to households and day-to-day life. Lack of documentation for a group does not prove that it had no religious function. Historians should, at the same time, refrain from drawing positive conclusions on the basis of that lack. The present study therefore does not attempt to differentiate between what is documented, what is historically plausible and what remains unproven.

Results and Discussion

Comparative Historical Analysis

The existing archival collection is somewhat disjointed in its structure. These descriptions in Europe are as much economic and political as they are religious; royal chronicles overlook the mundane and highlight dynastic memory; inscriptions include the approved or celebratory statement; and manuscripts reflect the communities that were literate. Tombstones and names do not necessarily represent a population survey but can signify the presence of Muslim individuals or groups (Lambourn, 2008).

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Islam in Indonesia: The Spread of Islam

Maritime exchange was already linking the societies in Southeast Asia well before the appearance of Muslim political centres. In addition to commercial networks linked to the major polities (Srivijaya and Majapahit), there were also Hindu-Buddhist traditions, indigenous ritual systems, veneration of ancestors and court religions (Coedès, 1968). It was the custom of these societies to have absorbed outside concepts into local political and cultural systems for a long time. Islam thus found itself placed in a context which was already well equipped to absorb religious and institutional foreign elements.

Before evidence for widespread local conversion, there is evidence for Muslim contact. There are scattered signs of Muslim activity in Arabic, Chinese and archaeological sources, but neither in geographic nor chronological distribution is the presence uniform. More evidence exists by the end of the 13th century for the political control of Muslims in northern Sumatra, especially in Samudra-Pasai. Later on, the Muslim communities and polities came into being in Malacca, Java, Aceh, Brunei, Sulu and Moluccas (Andaya, 1993, 2008). The analytical insight here is that contact, settlement, court affiliation and learning, as well as the practice in wider society, should not be considered as a one-to-one match.

Rationalization of temporary mobility as temporary settlement is through monsoon patterns and port residence. The rationalization of temporary mobility as temporary settlement is explained through monsoon patterns and port residence. Of course, traders who await a good wind could stay in their ports for a long time. For longer-term merchants, residence might be linked to prayer rooms, cemeteries and family connections, as well as to associations. The network of social connections in the community was connected to commercial mobility through intermarriage. For the purposes of historical plausibility of movement to settlement, these processes are well-demonstrated: the evidence needs to be explored individually before wider claims on conversion are made.

Islamization's geography also isn't just one place. The importance of connections with Malabar and other regions of the Indian subcontinent are stressed by Prange (2009) and the placing of South and Southeast Asia in broader Islamic circulations by Feener and Sevea (2009). The end result is a multi-nodal sea world that is not just an object of participation and consumption by the ports of Southeast Asia but is also a system unto itself.

Samudra-Pasai and Northern Sumatra

The strategic location of Sumatra is exemplified by the northern part of the island. The area was close to the shipping lines between the Bay of Bengal, Malay Peninsula and South China Sea. Samudra-Pasai was thus situated in an environment where business and commercial-political ties could fortify each other. The evidence is particularly valuable for proving an early Muslim kingship, but cannot serve as a full-fledged narrative for conversion to a particular region.

The methodological significance of Samudra-Pasai is the difference between political evidence and social inference. Establishing Muslim political authority is more direct with courtly or epigraphic evidence than it is in establishing the religious identity of surrounding populations. The case thus illustrates the ways in which political institutionalization can manifest itself before the historian can detect wider patterns of daily religious life.

Malacca: Trade and Court Patronage

The case of Malacca in the 15th century is one that is particularly amenable to the study of the relationships between commercial centrality and Muslim court identity. It was a harbor for a variety of traders, and in Tomé Pires's Summa Oriental, which is found in the Cortesão edition (Cortesao, 1944), it is described. There may have been interaction between the muscle power provided by the Muslim merchant networks and political power vested in the ruler: rulers could have gained from being allied with transregional commercial networks, whereas Muslim traders could gain from having political identity that would allow them to participate.

It is important to bear in mind that this relationship cannot be read as an indication that commerce was the only factor that changed the people living there. The trade record is very useful in showing the economic context and the existence of Muslim actors but not alone in providing a clue to individual motives of conversion or to the extent of social

change. Malacca is thus a rather good demonstration of a trade–court nexus, but not necessarily a proof of a merchant model, universal.

Aceh: Political Power and Scholarly Networks

The history of Aceh shows how political power and religious education might be tied together, especially in the early modern era. Following Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, trade was re-routed and Aceh became a political and economic hub for Muslims (Reid, 1993). Acehnese rulers ran the government through a blend of trade and diplomacy, military force and religious patronage.

Aceh is also significant due to the amount of surviving evidence that it has for scholarly and textual activity, which is relatively abundant. Azra (2004) elucidates connections between Malay-Indonesian scholars and to Mecca and Medina, and Malay-Arabic intellectual interactions reveal the importance of religious debate, copying texts, and granting authorizations. This is especially true of the intellectual and institutional settings from the early modern world. It cannot be considered as a direct model for all previous cases of conversion in northern Sumatra.

Java: Coastal Islam and Established Cultural Forms

It is because coastal connectivity is a partial explanation for the change in religion that Java shows how it is not possible to take it as a full one. Active involvement in maritime exchange took place in the northern coastal centres, while strong Javanese court, literary, ritual and political traditions remained influential in the construction of social identity. The rise of Demak and the transition to new political power did not happen in a single moment in history, but over a long period (Ricklefs 2006, 2008).

The Javanese case also illustrates that localization is not to be done at the end of a universal sequence. The religious change can occur with the possibility of the interaction of Islamic and Javanese identities during the process. Vernacular literary genres, mystical belief systems, court narratives, and architectural practice are thus signs of negotiation and adaptation. Woodward (1989) warns of the danger of viewing local expressions as incomplete or lacking Islam, and Florida (1995) shows how local historical narrative might provide a space in which Islamic and Javanese political identities could be expressed.

In this instance it also points to the difference between textual traditions that are visible and textual traditions that are not so visible, which in this case is the domestic tradition. Literary sources can provide information about the debates that took place regarding identities and normativity, but they do not necessarily offer information on the uniformity of such debates. The solidity of the evidence from Java is thus its ability to capture the process of negotiation in institutions and culture over a long period, not a straight measurement of popular conversion.

Brunei and Sulu: Dynastic and Maritime Connections

Brunei and Sulu were situated in an oceanic and dynastic sphere of influence which linked Borneo to the southern Philippines and beyond. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on the political institutions and dynastic relations of these contexts prior to and during the growing presence of European influence (Majul, 1973). The comparison is useful because both regions have a broad maritime linkage, but with different political histories and chronologies. The cases should not, however, be combined to form one story or given a single measure of religious change. The political sources are more useful than the social ones in determining dynastic affiliation, and social affiliation is more difficult to measure. The relevant conclusion is thus one of different historical courses in a common maritime context.

Ternate and Tidore: Spice Commerce and Political Rivalry

The Moluccas are also an example of interaction between commerce, political competition and Muslim affiliation. Tidore and Ternate grew up in a competitive environment of political centres, and a long history of clove trade (Andaya 1993). European intervention and the development of Muslim ties and political rivalry worked in concert to shift the balance of power in the region.

This case poses a question for any 'one size fits all' model that equates commercial exposure to the same religious result in any location. Repeated links have been established through spice trade, and political competition could enhance the importance of religious ties. However, competition does not constitute religious faith and there needs to be a distinction between religious practice and political strategy in the historical record.

Religious Transmission, Vernacularization, and Institutional Durability

Mechanisms of reproduction were key to the persistence of Islamic traditions. Religious knowledge was reproduced beyond the first contact through various settings, such as teachers and students, mosques and prayer places, manuscripts, schools, pesantren, surau and pondok institutions. Malay and Javanese provided a greater means to access religious instruction, and Arabic continued to hold an important role in the Islamic textual world (Braginsky, 2004; Ricci, 2011).

There is an important difference to be made analytically between the existence of a transmission network and evidence of its impact on a preceding time period. A transmission argument is a relatively strong one when a source indicates a teacher, a text, and an institution, and a community relationship in a documented chronology. Often, only later scholarly networks are discernible, and the evidence backs up statements of the later development of intellectual institutions rather than the exact place of earlier conversion.

Political Institutions, Law, and the Limits of Elite Evidence

Rulers and courts could offer material and institutional assistance which individual merchants or teachers cannot. The revenue of patronage could pay for mosques, scholars, judicial offices, education, legal offices, and diplomatic relations. Islamic law may affect marriage, inheritance, trade, and procedure, as they meet adat (Hooker, 1984).

History, however, teaches caution about linking court affiliation with general social change. The elite institutions are well documented through royal chronicles, inscriptions and diplomatic descriptions. They are less likely to be appropriate for the assessment of neighbouring households' practices. There is thus a need to understand political institutionalization as a process that can facilitate religious learning and social reproduction, rather than as a measure of Islamization at the population level.

Localization as Social Reproduction

The most obvious signs of localization are when Islamic notions become replicable in the regular social institutions and cultural modes. Evidence for this process can be found in vernacular writing, architectural practices, adat, naming, marriage, dying, food taboos, school education, and local ritual. However, such evidence is not well preserved, and cannot be used to indicate uniform adherence.

Local agency is a key component of this understanding. Southeast Asian actors ascended to rule, become scholars, writers, teachers, patrons, traders, and community leaders. Local rootedness did not mean that there was a lack of linkage to the wider Muslim world. It is this connection between a local expression and a participation in a larger umma

that Feener (2010) highlights. The importance of localization is, therefore, not that it was the end of the process, but that it illustrates the process by which a transregional religion found social significance in specific settings.

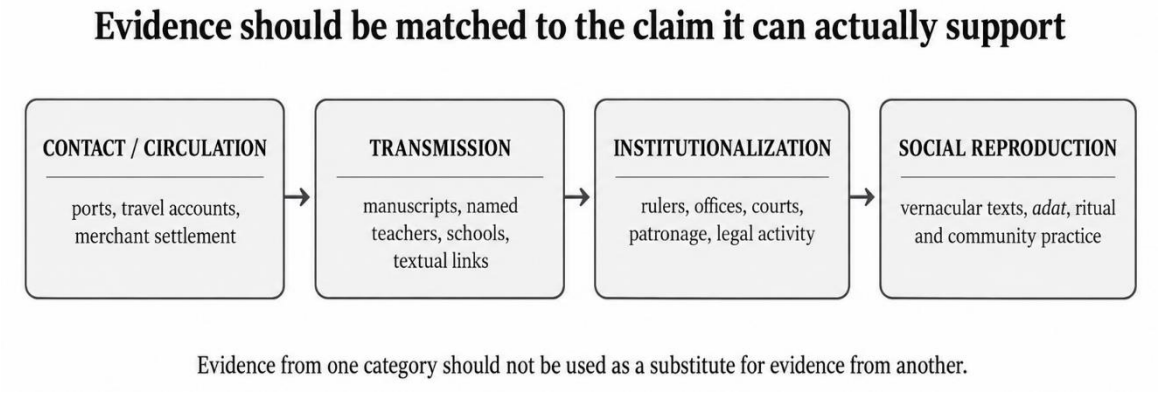


Figure 2. Evidence categories and the claims they can reasonably support.

Comparative Synthesis Across Cases

The cases can now be compared without assuming that they represent levels on a single scale. Samudra-Pasai is particularly useful for early Muslim kingship; Malacca for the relationship between commerce and court identity; Aceh for the interaction of political power and scholarly institutions; Java for long-term negotiation between coastal Islam and established cultural forms; Brunei and Sulu for differentiated dynastic trajectories; and Ternate and Tidore for the interaction of Muslim affiliation, spice commerce, and political rivalry.

Table 2
Regional Evidence and Limits of Interpretation

Case	Most visible historical relationship	Main evidentiary limitation
Samudra-Pasai	Early Muslim kingship within a strategic maritime setting	Elite evidence does not function as a population survey
Malacca	Trade, court patronage, and political identity	Commercial benefit does not establish individual conversion motives
Aceh	Political power combined with later scholarly networks	Later learning cannot be projected backward to every earlier conversion
Java	Coastal Muslim centres interacting with vernacular and court traditions	Court and literary narratives do not directly measure village practice
Brunei and Sulu	Dynastic, kinship, and maritime connections	Different historical chronologies should not be collapsed
Ternate and Tidore	Spice commerce, Muslim links, and political rivalry	Political competition is not proof of religious conviction

Table 3
Comparative Emphases Across Selected Maritime Southeast Asian Cases

Case	Most visible relationship	Interpretive caution
Samudra-Pasai	Early Muslim kingship; strategic port setting	Later institutional evidence cannot date all earlier conversion
Malacca	Trade, court patronage, and political identity	Merchant benefit does not establish individual conversion
Aceh	State power and later scholarly networks	Later learning does not explain every earlier conversion
Java	Coastal centres, vernacular traditions, and court traditions	Court narratives do not directly measure village life

Brunei and Sulu	Dynastic and maritime connections	Their different local chronologies should remain distinct
Ternate and Tidore	Spice trade, political rivalry, and Muslim links	Competition is not proof of religious conviction

Note. These are interpretive emphases, not numerical rankings of causes or levels of Islamization.

Contact Is Not Equivalent to Conversion

First, evidence of movement, settlement or Muslim presence is distinguished from the evidence of local religious change. Muslim presence can be inferred to the merchants, graves, names, and port settlements, but these do not necessarily imply a universal adoption of Islam. Interactions were taking place on maritime networks, but not necessarily because of them.

Political Affiliation Is Not Equivalent to Social Transformation

Second, Islam in the public arena is likely to be more visible than the use of the house. Traces of Muslim rulers, courts, offices and legal institutions are easily found; everyday practice is less so. Therefore, political institutionalization is a potential intervening factor, but should not be assumed to be a causal determinant of population-wide conversion.

Transmission and Durability Require Reproduction

Third, religious traditions need institutional reproduction and socialization to be long-lasting. The explanation of how Islam could survive beyond the time of contact and by elite adoption is provided by the teachers, manuscripts, schools, mosques, vernacular literature, family relationships, and community practices. The Aceh and Java are informative because the scholarly and vernacular evidence for such reproduction is more prominent later on (Azra, 2004; Ricklefs, 2006).

Historical Unevenness Includes Uneven Documentation

Lastly, the discrepancy in the evidence is a part of the discrepancy of historical retention. A society whose evidence is found overwhelmingly in the courts, as opposed to commercial or literary sources, may seem more politically institutionalized than a society whose surviving evidence is primarily commercial or literary. What the historian had to do was to differentiate between differences of historical development and differences of documentary visibility. That is the reason why the four dimensions are not numerically ranked in the framework.

Connected Processes Rather Than Isolated Causes

The main value of the article is the disciplined method of relating processes which other literature has studied using varied sets of evidence. Mobility, religious learning, political authority and localization are not four communities of actors and not four steps. The same historical subject might be involved in more than one process at a time: a merchant could create a family network and provide patronage for a place of prayer; a ruler could sponsor religious scholars; a religious scholar could rely on patronages from the court and on travelling by sea; and a vernacular writer could link local readership to a transregional Islamic intellectual network.

The framework thus fosters relational questions. When did local ties become regular ties of commerce? What is the minimum time that a teaching institution can become a documented institution and have a connection to a Muslim community? When did political patronage lead to long-lasting positions or institutions of education? When can vernacular/custodial forms be demonstrated to be capable of reproducing Islamic norms

outside of elites institutions? These questions can be compared but don't have to be done in the same sequence as all societies.

Enabling Conditions, Mediating Institutions, and Observable Outcomes

It can be helpful to separate out enabling conditions, mediating institutions and observable outcomes. Sea travel was a means to an end in contact. There were a number of possible intermediaries between opportunity and continuing religious activity: teachers, households, courts, mosques, schools, and patronage systems. Some of the more tangible results of which historians can be more certain are texts, legal offices, educational institutions, ritual practices, and durable communities.

These can overlap and turn around in time. Patronage could be because of the previous affiliation with the Muslims and also patronize later scholarship. Institutional continuity may be deepened in established communities as new teachers are attracted, and new teachers may contribute to the continuity in established communities. That sort of feedback is plausible in the past, but a model of mutual feedback can't tell you when or where a given episode took place. The argument must always be presented in the evidence that is specific to the source.

Avoiding Retrospective and Circular Reasoning

One potential danger for the historical examination of Islamization is that the institution of Islam would be used to deduce the mechanism of Islamization in the preceding era, because the former does exist in the latter. The same issue arises in the case of the existence of a Muslim polity, where it is assumed that maritime circulation, religious transmission, political institutionalization, and local social reproduction must have been the same.

Disciplined approach is the way to go with incomplete combinations. Maritime connections can be represented even if there is no scientific evidence of its popularity. It may be possible to see court institutions that did not have an explicit record of previous teaching. The missionary activity may be securely reconstructed later literary or Sufi traditions, even if they are well attested. Such gaps are interpreted as real limits of the archive and enhance—not weaken—historical interpretation.

Local Agency and the Problem of "Syncretism" as a Shortcut

The comparison also gives reason to be wary of the use of terms like "syncretic" without giving specific reference to the process being referred. The local forms of Islam must not be taken as incomplete Islam. Vernacular religious text, architecture, adat and community practice can depict the dynamic interaction between Islamic norms and inherited social institutions (Ricci, 2011; Feener, 2010). The more useful question to ask, however, is, how did those negotiations take place and what is there to record them?

Implications for Comparative-Historical Research

The framework has two policy implications for further studies. First, rather than comparing regions, an analysis of evidence types should be done. Commercial records, inscriptions, texts and material evidence can be used in a study of two port cities to enhance the study. Second, the archive needs to be enlarged (where possible) beyond the confines of court and published literary traditions. The visibility gap of the households and the ordinary religious life can be addressed through archaeological work, studies of manuscripts, where available, family histories or focused research into inland settlements.

The scope of the framework is deliberately limited. It is not able to generate relative causal weights or to create conversion rates. It also will not remove the fact that the cases have been recorded with various source bases. It is important because it helps to highlight those differences and to minimize the likelihood of turning an enabling context into a historical outcome.

Conclusion

There are no simple explanations or universal sequences for the process of Islamization in maritime Southeast Asia. The comparative examples lend themselves to a more nuanced reading in which the circulation in the sea, transmission of religion, authority over political power, and reproduction of local societies were intertwined in varying historical contexts. Their relationships were linked – not all at once and not all in the history.

The key methodological discovery is that there are different kinds of evidence that make different kinds of claims. Contact is indicated by Muslim merchants or settlements, but not by Muslim merchants alone. Political affiliation and institutionalization in the form of a Muslim ruler or court does not necessarily imply religious practices in adjacent communities. It is important for later scholarly networks and Sufi traditions to be capable of demonstrating meaningful intellectual continuity; they should not simply be 'thrown back' to account for unrecorded early conversion. Local embedding and durability can be uncovered in vernacular texts, adat, and architecture; but the uneven preservation of these means only that some have survived well enough to allow for more precise claims of scale and timing of everyday practice.

This is confirmed by the regional cases. Malacca is of special interest with respect to the connection between commercial centrality and court patronage. Aceh shows the intimate association of political power with later "scholarly institutions. Java shows how negotiation is extended between the coastal Islamic communities and cultural forms established. The first Islamic kingship appears in Samudra-Pasai, a strategic maritime environment, and Sulu, Ternate, and Tidore demonstrate how the various maritime contexts of dynastic, commercial, and political activity could have led to different historical pathways.

The larger message is that there was no "overall" strength of one factor over the other. It is not possible to rank such evidence with the evidence. The more defensible one is that Islamization was made durable as a result of opportunities provided by maritime interaction that could be linked to institutions of learning, political support, and forms of religious life which were localizable and reproducible. By the past, these relationships were not necessarily hierarchical.

This framework can be further developed in future studies using paired case studies with more clearly defined time frames and appropriate and comparable evidence. The tendency of the documentary sources to focus on ports, rulers, and literate centers can be offset somewhat by archaeological research, manuscript studies, family narratives (where available), and by taking a closer look at inland settlements. Until this evidence is extended, the best comparative history will be one which clearly identifies what can be definitely proved, what can be only tentatively suggested, and what cannot be conclusively proved.

Recommendations

The following three recommendations are derived from this study. First, future studies on the issue of Islamization in maritime Southeast Asia should not be conducted on a regional level but rather on a comparison of types of evidence. Two case studies of port cities or polities, with distinct temporal boundaries, might be used to compare and contrast both commercial records and inscriptions, as well as texts and material culture, to explore the relationship between the movement of goods, the transmission of

religious ideas, the exercise of political power, and the localization of people and things in each.

Secondly, the evidence base needs to be expanded to include non-literate centres, rulers and courts. The gap between elite institutions and everyday religious life in households and villages can be narrowed by archaeological excavations, manuscript research, family histories (where available), and focused research on the interior settlements. This work could enable more precise statements regarding the extent and the rate of religious change in a particular area. Thirdly, historians must be explicit in their rules of evidence for interpreting the process of Islamization.

Third, historians need to be explicit about rules of evidence to interpret Islamization. Claims of contact, political affiliation, institutional transmission, and social embedding should be separated and then further scholarly networks or Sufi traditions should not be retroactively used to account for undocumented early conversion. Use of the term "syncretism" is appropriate only when there is clear evidence of the fusion of Islamic norms and local practices. Comparative histories should clearly identify what is securely established, what is only tentatively suggested, and what is not yet established.

Declaration

The author declares that this article is an original scholarly work prepared for academic publication. The study is based on a critical review and analysis of published scholarly literature and relevant historical and documentary sources, all of which have been appropriately acknowledged and cited. The author further declares that the manuscript has not been published previously and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Author's Contribution

The author independently conceptualized the study, reviewed the relevant scholarly literature and historical documents, developed the theoretical and analytical framework, conducted the documentary analysis, and prepared and finalized the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for academic research. As the research relies exclusively on published literature and publicly available documentary sources and does not involve human participants or the collection of personal data, institutional ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

AI Use Statement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with language refinement, grammatical correction, clarity, and manuscript organization. The author retains

responsibility for the scholarly arguments, interpretation of evidence, accuracy of citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The study is based on published scholarly literature and publicly available historical and documentary sources identified in the manuscript and reference list. No new empirical dataset was generated. The materials supporting the analysis can be accessed through their respective publications and sources.

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