

The History of the Arrival of Islam in Indonesia by Tracing Historical Theories and Evidence

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Abstract

This study examines the historical process of Islam's spread into the Indonesian archipelago by analyzing major theories, archaeological discoveries, linguistic patterns, and local as well as foreign written records. The research aims to clarify how Islam entered and developed across different regions by using a qualitative method focused on document analysis and interpretive comparison of historical sources. Findings indicate that Islam did not arrive through a single route but through interconnected channels shaped by maritime trade, political endorsement, cultural adaptation, and Sufi-led spiritual outreach. Early Muslim communities formed in coastal centers where merchants from India, Persia, Arabia, and China engaged in sustained commercial and social exchanges. The acceptance of Islam accelerated when local rulers converted, strengthening institutional development in law, education, and governance. A key novelty of this study lies in its integrated use of multi-source evidence to highlight Islamization as a gradual and layered transformation rather than a singular event. The results provide a clearer understanding of how Islamic teachings blended with local traditions, producing distinctive regional expressions of Islamic culture. The study offers valuable implications for historical scholarship, showing that the spread of Islam in Indonesia must be viewed within broader global, cultural, and economic dynamics, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian Islamic history.

Keywords: Cultural Adaptation, Indonesian History, Islamization



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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago stands as one of the most influential turning points in the region's historical development. The introduction of Islamic teachings reshaped long-established cultural patterns, political systems, and intellectual traditions that had previously been rooted in Hindu-Buddhist influence (Khasanah et al., 2023). The transition occurred gradually through extended contact with Muslim traders, scholars, and travelers operating along the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. Commercial exchanges became a vital channel for the movement of ideas, religious concepts, and social practices, enabling Islamic values to enter coastal communities peacefully and adaptively. The geographical position of Indonesia at the center of global sea routes strengthened its accessibility, making the region open to diverse cultural and religious influences arriving from different parts of the Muslim world.

Scholarly discussions about the origins of Islam in Indonesia rely on several major theories supported by archaeological discoveries, historical manuscripts, and linguistic evidence. The Gujarat Theory bases its argument on similarities in tombstone styles, trade connections, and the prominence of Muslim communities in western India during the period when maritime commerce flourished (Vickers, 2023). The Arabia Theory emphasizes early contact between Arab sailors and the peoples of Southeast Asia, supported by travel accounts that mention the archipelago long before Islam spread widely. The Persia Theory draws from parallels in artistic motifs, religious traditions, and cultural practices observed in early Islamic centers in Indonesia. Each theory provides valuable insight and indicates that the spread of Islam most likely resulted from multiple cultural interactions rather than a single point of origin. The expansion of Islam gained momentum through thriving port cities that functioned as commercial hubs and cultural meeting points. Muslim merchants stopped in these ports not only to trade goods but also to introduce moral teachings, religious ideas, and social norms that attracted local populations.

Long-standing commercial relations created trust, allowing Islamic teachings to be embraced without coercion. Inter-marriage between foreign Muslim traders and local inhabitants further contributed to the growth of early Muslim communities. The role of religious scholars was equally significant, especially in establishing educational gatherings, interpreting Islamic principles, and adapting methods of teaching to align with local customs (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024). This flexible and inclusive approach enabled Islam to merge with indigenous traditions, resulting in a harmonious cultural integration rather than a disruptive transformation. The adoption of Islam by local rulers marked a crucial phase in its expansion. Conversion among political leaders was influenced not only by spiritual conviction but also by broader economic and diplomatic considerations. Islamic identity offered access to extensive Muslim trade networks and strengthened legitimacy in regional politics (Zulfadli et al., 2024). The rise of Islamic kingdoms such as Samudera Pasai, Demak, Ternate, and Gowa-Tallo demonstrated how deeply Islam had taken root in governance, legal systems, and social structures. Educational institutions such as pesantrens emerged as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, shaping generations of scholars and community leaders.

Cultural expressions also evolved, with literature, architecture, and performing arts reflecting the synthesis of Islamic aesthetics and local artistic heritage. The strengthening of Islamic influence continued through intellectual networks that connected Indonesian scholars with major learning centers in the Middle East. Students from various parts of the archipelago traveled to study in Mecca, Medina, and Cairo, returning with advanced religious knowledge, classical texts, and refined pedagogical methods. These exchanges enriched local traditions of scholarship and positioned Indonesia as an active participant in the global Islamic intellectual community. The spread of written works in Arabic, Malay, and Javanese further broadened religious literacy and solidified Islamic teachings within society.

Historical analysis shows that the spread of Islam in Indonesia unfolded primarily through peaceful interaction, trade relations, and cultural adaptation rather than violence or conquest. The harmonious nature of these encounters facilitated deep acceptance across diverse ethnic and cultural groups. The resulting form of Islam developed into a distinctive expression known for moderation, inclusiveness, and appreciation for local customs. Understanding this long historical journey provides essential insight into how Islamic identity in Indonesia evolved, offering a clearer view of the archipelago's role in the larger narrative of Islamic civilization.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the historical process surrounding the arrival and spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. The qualitative approach is selected because the subject of historical transmission, cultural interaction, and religious development cannot be adequately captured through numerical data. This method allows for a deep interpretation of historical themes by examining textual evidence, cultural artifacts, and narrative accounts that illustrate how Islam gradually integrated into local societies (Rostiyati et al., 2024). A qualitative framework provides the flexibility to analyze different types of sources while considering the social, economic, and cultural context in which historical developments occurred. The research relies primarily on document analysis, an approach widely used in qualitative historical studies. Document analysis in this context involves investigating written records such as classical manuscripts, travel accounts, royal chronicles, inscriptions, and early Islamic legal documents preserved in various regions of Indonesia. These documents offer valuable insights into political structures, trade networks, religious activities, and social dynamics during the period when Islamic influence began to expand. The study also examines archaeological findings, particularly gravestones, ceramics, coins, and architectural remains that contain Islamic symbols or inscriptions. Such artifacts contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and religious transformation that accompanied the spread of Islam.

The process of data collection follows several structured steps. The first step consists of gathering primary and secondary sources from libraries, digital archives, museums, and academic publications. Primary sources include ancient inscriptions, foreign travelers' reports, early Malay manuscripts, and historical documents produced by Islamic kingdoms. Secondary sources consist of scientific articles, books, and research papers that analyze historical data and interpret earlier findings. During source selection, attention is paid to authenticity, credibility, and relevance to ensure that the information reflects accurate historical conditions. The inclusion of diverse sources allows the study to present a balanced and multidimensional perspective. Data analysis uses an interpretative and thematic approach (Wibowo et al., 2023). Thematic analysis begins by identifying recurring patterns within the texts and artifacts, such as references to trade routes, mentions of foreign scholars, descriptions of religious practices, or depictions of political alliances. These themes are categorized to reveal broader trends that explain how Islam entered various parts of the archipelago. Interpretation involves

contextualizing the data within historical realities, such as the role of Indian Ocean trade, social hierarchies, indigenous belief systems, and political transitions. The analysis also considers differences between regions, acknowledging that Islam did not spread uniformly but followed distinct paths depending on local dynamics.

Triangulation is employed to enhance the study's credibility and reliability. This involves comparing findings from different types of sources to confirm similarities or identify inconsistencies. For example, a foreign traveler's account may describe the presence of Muslim communities along a particular coastline, and this information can be cross-referenced with archaeological discoveries in the same area. Royal chronicles may record the conversion of a local ruler, which can be verified through inscriptions or material remains associated with early Islamic governance (Rukayah et al., 2023). By integrating multiple sources, the study reduces the risk of bias and strengthens the validity of the conclusions. Researcher interpretation in qualitative historical studies requires sensitivity to cultural perspectives and awareness of potential limitations in source material. Many classical texts were written from the viewpoint of specific political or cultural groups, which may influence how events were recorded. To address this challenge, the analysis pays close attention to context, intended audience, and narrative structure. This helps determine whether certain descriptions are objective, symbolic, or intended to support political authority. Consideration of these factors ensures that the reconstruction of historical events reflects a balanced understanding rather than a single dominant narrative.

Ethical considerations also play a role in qualitative research. Although historical studies do not typically involve human subjects, ethical responsibility is reflected in the accurate representation of sources, the avoidance of misinterpretation, and respect for cultural heritage. The study acknowledges the significance of Islamic artifacts, texts, and traditions as part of Indonesia's national identity and ensures that interpretations do not distort historical meaning. Proper citation of sources is maintained to honor the contributions of previous scholars and preserve academic integrity.

The qualitative method used in this study provides a holistic and interpretative framework that is essential for understanding the complex process of Islamization in Indonesia. Through document analysis, thematic interpretation, and triangulation, the research captures the social, political, and cultural dimensions that shaped the arrival of Islam. The approach allows the study to appreciate the nuances of historical development, such as peaceful interactions, trade relations, intellectual exchange, and cultural adaptation. The qualitative methodology ultimately supports a rich reconstruction of Indonesia's Islamic past, offering insights into how local traditions and external influences merged to form a distinctive Islamic identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative investigation produced several important findings that help explain how Islam entered and developed within the Indonesian archipelago. The results show that the spread of Islam did not occur through conflict or forced conversion but through long-term interactions shaped by trade, cultural contact, and social relationships. The evidence collected from historical texts, early manuscripts, archaeological objects, and academic interpretations pointed to a peaceful and gradual process. The findings also suggest that Islam did not arrive from a single region or in one unified wave. Instead, the process involved multiple sources and various groups of Muslim travelers who came from different cultural backgrounds. One of the most consistent findings showed that maritime trade was the primary channel for the introduction of Islam. The Indonesian archipelago had been part of major trading routes for many centuries, connecting the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. As ships carrying spices, textiles, and other valuable goods passed through the region, Muslim merchants often

stayed for extended periods in port towns. Their long-term presence created opportunities for interaction with local populations. These interactions made it easier for Islamic teachings to be introduced in a natural and friendly way.

Evidence from tombstones and inscriptions found in areas such as Aceh East Java and Ternate showed early traces of Islamic influence. These tombstones, made from imported stone materials and engraved with Arabic calligraphy, served as clear indicators that Muslim communities existed in several coastal areas. The style of these grave markers also helped researchers identify possible origins of early Muslim groups who settled in the region. Some markers showed similarities to those found in Gujarat, while others resembled styles from Persia or Arabia. These similarities supported the idea that many sources contributed to the early development of Islam in Indonesia. Another key result revealed that local communities accepted Islam because it blended easily with existing customs. Qualitative data from oral traditions, local stories, and early manuscripts showed that Islamic teachings were often introduced through everyday practices rather than formal religious instruction. Muslim traders taught basic values such as honesty, fairness, kindness, and cooperation, which aligned with existing ethical norms. Because these values matched the moral principles already practiced by local communities, Islam was seen as familiar rather than foreign.

The results also showed that marriage played an important role in the spread of Islam. Muslim merchants often married local women, forming families that practiced Islamic traditions. These marriages created bridges between foreign traders and local society. When these families grew, they helped form the earliest Muslim communities in port areas. This pattern was found consistently in several coastal regions across Sumatra, Java, and eastern Indonesia. Findings related to political authority showed a strong connection between the rise of Islamic kingdoms and the spread of the religion. When local rulers adopted Islam, their subjects generally followed. This pattern appeared clearly in the case of Samudera Pasai, one of the earliest Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The kingdom became an important center for Islamic scholarship and trade, attracting scholars and merchants from abroad. The presence of these scholars helped strengthen Islamic knowledge and influenced neighboring regions to adopt the religion. The study also found that Islam spread more quickly after the establishment of Islamic educational institutions. Although these institutions were simple at first, they played an important role in teaching basic Islamic principles. Early forms of pesantren provided lessons on reading the Qur'an, understanding prayer, and learning moral teachings. As these institutions grew, they became important centers for transmitting Islamic knowledge across generations.

Cultural adaptation was another major finding. Islam developed a unique local character in Indonesia because it adapted to existing cultural expressions. Evidence from traditional art, music, literature, and ceremonies illustrated how Islamic values blended with local traditions. For example, many local stories included Islamic moral lessons, and certain ceremonies were given new meanings that aligned with Islamic teachings. This blending process helped Islam grow without creating cultural conflict. Qualitative data also indicated that Islamic influence spread inland only after it became established in coastal regions. Coastal areas were the first to receive Islamic influence because of their direct contact with foreign traders. Once port communities had strong Muslim populations, Islamic teachings began moving to inland areas through trade networks, traveling scholars, and local teachers. This pattern showed that Islam expanded gradually from the coast to the interior, following established routes of social and economic interaction.

Another result showed that ulama (Islamic scholars) played a major role in explaining Islamic concepts to local communities. These scholars often used simple language and local analogies to help people understand the teachings. Their approachable teaching style made Islamic knowledge easier to accept. Many of these ulama also traveled between different regions, creating networks that connected Islamic communities across the archipelago. These

networks contributed to a shared religious identity that strengthened over time. Findings from written sources indicated that Indonesia had strong connections with the Middle East. Many local scholars traveled to Mecca and Medina to study and later returned home with new knowledge. These scholars introduced new interpretations, religious texts, and teaching methods. This exchange of knowledge helped create a stable intellectual foundation for the development of Islam in the region. Another important finding was the connection between economic benefits and the adoption of Islam. Local leaders realized that becoming Muslim allowed them to build stronger relationships with other Muslim kingdoms. These relationships supported trade, strengthened political alliances, and gave local rulers more prestige. Because of these advantages, Islam became attractive not only as a religion but also as a source of economic and political strength. Overall, the qualitative results clearly showed that Islam entered Indonesia through peaceful, organic processes that relied on social trust, trade relationships, and cultural adaptation.

Islam grew because it respected local traditions and blended with them. This created a distinct form of Islam that reflects both its original teachings and the local cultural environment. The results also confirmed that the spread of Islam was not uniform across the archipelago. Different regions experienced different influences depending on their trade relationships, political conditions, and cultural traditions. For example, coastal areas with strong trade connections adopted Islam earlier than isolated inland areas. Regions with influential local rulers who embraced Islam also adopted the religion faster. In summary, the findings demonstrate that Islam's arrival in Indonesia was shaped by peaceful interaction, cultural blending, political adaptation, and educational development. These results show that Islam did not replace local culture but became part of it, creating a rich and unique Islamic heritage that continues to influence Indonesian society today.

The historical arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago has generated long-standing academic interest mainly because the process did not follow a single pattern. Various regions received Islamic influence at different periods, and the pathways of transmission were shaped by trade routes, political situations, and the social openness of local communities. Understanding the spread of Islam in this region requires careful attention to archaeological findings, local chronicles, linguistic evidence, and external records from travelers or foreign states. Through these sources, a clearer picture emerges about how Islamic teachings slowly became rooted within the cultural landscape of the archipelago. Scholars commonly group the explanation of Islam's arrival into several major theories: the Gujarat Theory, the Persian Theory, the Arab Theory, and the Chinese Theory (Bourchier & Jusuf, 2023). Each theory is supported by distinctive evidence, showing that Islam entered the region gradually rather than through one event. The Gujarat Theory proposes that Muslim traders from India played a major role, supported by similarities in tombstone styles and trade connections between Indonesian ports and Gujarat. The Persian Theory highlights cultural and ritual parallels between certain Indonesian Islamic practices and those in Persia (Permata et al., 2025). The Arab Theory argues that Islam came directly from the Arabian Peninsula, strengthened by early Arab navigation records and the active roles of Hadhrami merchants. The Chinese Theory, though less dominant, suggests the contribution of Chinese Muslim communities based on historical Chinese documents and artifacts found in several coastal cities.

When examining these theories, the Indonesian archipelago's position within the Indian Ocean trading network becomes an essential factor. Strategic ports such as Pasai, Gresik, Ternate, and Makassar functioned as hubs where merchants from various civilizations engaged in economic exchanges. Through continuous interactions, traders not only exchanged commodities such as spices, textiles, and ceramics but also transferred religious values, customs, and social norms (Emzaed et al., 2023). Islam was introduced through these interpersonal contacts, allowing the religion to gain acceptance without significant conflict. The gradual nature of its spread explains why Islamic values blended smoothly with existing

traditions. Trade influence alone, however, does not fully explain how Islam gained social and political support. The involvement of local rulers in accepting Islam played a crucial role in accelerating its expansion. When a local king or elite adopted Islam, the population typically followed. This phenomenon occurred in several major Islamic kingdoms such as Samudra Pasai, Demak, Ternate, and Gowa (Zada, 2023). Political endorsement gave Islam structural strength, integrating religious teachings into local governance, legal systems, and educational institutions. The role of scholars, missionaries, and Sufi figures was equally significant, especially because Sufism's flexible and inclusive approach matched the cultural environment of the archipelago.

Another aspect that shaped the acceptance of Islam was its ability to coexist with local customs. Instead of demanding total cultural replacement, early Islamic teachings interacted with local beliefs such as animism, Hindu-Buddhist traditions, and regional rituals eventually creating unique Islamic expressions. Architectural designs, traditional ceremonies, and literary works reflect this cultural blending (Koopman, 2023). Mosques built in traditional Javanese architectural styles, or Islamic poetry written in local languages, show how Islamic influence adapted to regional contexts. This adaptability made Islam more accessible and relatable to various communities. The role of written records cannot be overlooked when tracing the spread of Islam. Local chronicles such as the Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, Babad Tanah Jawi, and Sejarah Melayu describe the arrival of Islamic teachers and the conversion of early rulers. Although these texts sometimes contain legendary elements, historians use them alongside material findings to validate historical patterns (Khoiroh & Syakur, 2023). External records, including Chinese dynastic writings and Middle Eastern travel notes, strengthen the narrative of maritime connections between distant regions and the Indonesian archipelago. These documents provide valuable timelines and descriptions that help scholars understand the wider context of Islamic expansion.

Archaeological findings remain some of the most tangible evidence for reconstructing early Islamic presence. Tombstones bearing Arabic inscriptions, ancient mosques, ceramic artifacts, and urban settlement patterns reveal how Islamic culture developed over time (Leavy et al., 2023). The Aceh region, for instance, holds some of the earliest Islamic tombstones, while Java contains several ancient mosques with distinct local architectural features. These material remains allow historians to determine the approximate periods in which Islamic communities formed and spread. Linguistic and cultural evidence further supports the picture of Islam's gradual integration into society (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). The widespread use of Arabic vocabulary in Malay, the development of the Jawi script, and the production of Islamic literary works show how language became a medium of religious education. Islamic laws, ethical teachings, and storytelling formats were adapted into local languages, enabling broader social acceptance. The presence of Malay as a lingua franca in trade networks also helped accelerate Islamic transmission across islands.

The influence of Sufi teachers deserves special emphasis due to their central role in the spiritual and social spread of Islam in the archipelago. Sufi scholars used interpersonal teaching, compassion, and cultural engagement to invite communities toward Islamic values. Through rituals such as zikir, poetry, and music, Islamic spirituality aligned closely with local artistic traditions (Pamungkas et al., 2023). Sufi orders such as Qadiriyyah, Naqsyabandiyah, and Syattariyyah left profound impacts on religious education and community organization. Islam's spread did not occur in isolation; it was intertwined with geopolitical changes across Asia. The rise and fall of Indian and Middle Eastern powers altered trade routes and influenced merchant movements. China's maritime policies during the Ming Dynasty also shaped contact between Chinese Muslim communities and Southeast Asian ports.

These global dynamics contributed indirectly to the process, creating opportunities for Islamic ideas to reach Indonesian shores. Leadership transitions within local kingdoms also shaped the pace of Islamic development. Some rulers promoted Islamic law and education, while others maintained syncretic systems combining older beliefs with Islamic values. The diversity of these approaches explains why Islamic expressions differ across regions. In some areas, Islamic law became dominant quickly, while in others, cultural blending continued for generations. The social structure of coastal communities played a major role as well. Merchant groups often held influential positions, enabling them to introduce new practices and beliefs. Conversion sometimes brought economic advantages, such as strengthened alliances with Muslim trading partners. As Islamic networks expanded from port towns to inland regions, rural communities slowly adopted the new religion through trade, marriage, and education.

Over time Islam transformed from a minority belief system into a major cultural foundation across the archipelago. The establishment of pesantren, mosque-based learning centers, and Islamic kingdoms created a systematic framework for transmitting religious knowledge. Islamic teachings influenced daily life, legal traditions, and social ethics. Artistic expressions, including calligraphy, storytelling, and architecture, reflected Islamic aesthetics blended with local creativity. Understanding the spread of Islam in Indonesia requires viewing these developments as interconnected processes. Trade, political support, cultural adaptation, spiritual guidance, and global dynamics worked together in shaping the region's Islamic identity. This complex history shows that the arrival of Islam cannot be explained by a single theory alone; instead, it reflects the interactions of many forces over long periods. Altogether, the available evidence provides a multifaceted understanding of how Islam gradually established a strong presence in the Indonesian archipelago. Historical, archaeological, linguistic, and cultural sources help reconstruct this transformation in a way that highlights the richness of Indonesia's Islamic heritage.

CONCLUSION

The historical spread of Islam into the Indonesian archipelago represents a long and complex process shaped by interactions across various regions cultures and economic networks. Evidence from archaeology, language development, local manuscripts, and international records indicates that Islamic influence did not arrive through one pathway, but instead through multiple channels that operated over several centuries. The combination of trade connections, political decisions, cultural adaptation, and spiritual guidance created a gradual transformation that shaped the religious landscape of the region. The role of trade was central in introducing Islamic values to coastal communities. Merchants from India, Persia, Arabia, and China engaged in constant exchanges with local populations, bringing not only goods but also religious teachings and ethical traditions. These interactions occurred peacefully, allowing Islamic ideas to enter daily life without force or conflict. As commercial ties strengthened, Muslim communities emerged in major port cities, forming the earliest foundations of Islamic culture in the archipelago.

Political support from local rulers accelerated this transformation. When regional leaders accepted Islam, their authority helped spread the religion to wider populations. Islamic kingdoms such as Samudra Pasai, Demak, Ternate, and Gowa played influential roles in shaping administration, law, and education according to Islamic principles. This provided structural strength for Islamic institutions and created environments where religious knowledge could be passed down systematically. Cultural adaptation was another significant aspect of Islam's acceptance. Islamic teachings blended harmoniously with established traditions, resulting in unique local expressions of Islamic culture. Architectural styles, literary works, and social customs demonstrate this adaptation process. The integration of Islamic values with

existing cultural frameworks helped the religion become familiar, approachable, and relevant for diverse communities.

Spiritual figures especially those associated with Sufi traditions contributed to Islam's deeper acceptance. Their approaches emphasized compassion, personal guidance, and cultural sensitivity, making religious learning accessible to various social groups. Through poetry, music, rituals, and interpersonal teaching, Sufi scholars shaped moral and spiritual frameworks across many regions. Global political and economic developments also influenced Islamic expansion. Shifts in power within India, the Middle East, and China affected maritime routes and increased the movement of Muslim merchants. These broader dynamics indirectly supported the spread of Islamic ideas into Southeast Asia. Overall, the process of Islamization in Indonesia resulted from the interaction of multiple forces working together over a long period. No single theory fully explains its origins because Islam arrived through interconnected and overlapping channels. The combined influence of trade, politics, cultural adaptation, linguistic development, and spiritual leadership produced a distinctive Islamic identity that continues to shape Indonesian society today.

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