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Gujarat To Malacca: Trade Routes and the Process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an analysis of Malay civilization and its pivotal role in history, emphasizing that Islamization occurred through longterm social, economic, and cultural interactions. It aims to explain the strategic role of trade routes between Gujarat and Malacca in spreading Islam across the Malay Archipelago. Using a qualitative library research method, the results show that Gujarat functioned as a major trade center and primary intermediary in the Indian Ocean since the 13th century. Through maritime activities, Muslim traders introduced Islamic teachings to Malacca, which evolved into the archipelago's main religious center. Beyond economic factors, this process was strengthened by intermarriage, cohesive Muslim communities, and adaptive da'wah. Furthermore, the role of Islamic scholars (ulama) was crucial as they served as religious teachers, political advisors, and intellectual figures who adapted Islamic teachings into local Malay culture. This research underscores that such cultural adaptation laid the groundwork for a moderate form of Islam in the archipelago. Ultimately, these historical dynamics provide vital insights into the resilient and adaptive nature of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

Malay civilization holds an important place in history. The process of Islamization in this region did not occur suddenly but through a long period of social, economic, and cultural interaction. Since the 13th century, the archipelago has been part of an international trade network that connects the Middle East, India, and China through maritime routes (Sulistiono, 2017). Among the regions that play an important role in this network is Gujarat, which is known as a major trading center and strategic port on the west coast of India. From this area, many Muslim traders sailed to ports

throughout Southeast Asia, including Malacca, which eventually became a major center for the spread of Islam throughout the Malay world (Peacock, 2024).

Back then, Gujarat was a prosperous and cosmopolitan region. Its ports, such as Cambay and Surat, are bustling with merchants from Arabia, Persia, and East Africa. The people of Gujarat are famous not only for their trading skills but also for their role as spreaders of Islam in the regions they visit. Through their trading activities, Muslim traders from Gujarat bring with them Islamic values that are integrated with business ethics and social interaction. Thus, trade functioned not only as a means of exchange of goods but also as a medium for religious and cultural transmission.

Meanwhile, Malacca experienced rapid development in the 15th century under the rule of Parameswara, who later converted to Islam and took the title of Sultan Iskandar Shah. Malacca became the center of international trade in Southeast Asia. Its strategic position along major maritime routes makes it an important port for ships from Gujarat, Arabia, and China (Noh & Jalil, 2015). At this port, there was interaction between local and foreign traders, including from Gujarat. Long-standing contacts encourage significant cultural, linguistic, and, especially, religious exchanges. Through this intensive interaction, Islamic teachings began to be accepted and developed in Malay society (Azizah et al., 2025).

In addition to trade, social and cultural factors also strengthened the process of Islamization in the Malay Islands. Gujarat merchants were not only involved in economic transactions, they also forged social bonds through marriages, business partnerships, and the formation of Muslim communities in various ports of the archipelago. This relationship facilitates the peaceful and voluntary acceptance of Islam. The form of Islam that developed in the Malay region was moderate and adaptable to the local culture, which ultimately formed the foundation of Malay Islamic identity. This process shows that Islamization in the region is more cultural and dialogical than political (Hunt, 1997).

The trade route between Gujarat and Malacca also played a role in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and civilization. Through this route, not only goods but also religious ideas, scientific traditions, and Islamic social systems are exchanged. Its influence can be seen in the development of religious institutions, the adoption of the Jawi script, and the emergence of Islamic kingdoms throughout the Malay world (Baiti & Rozaq, 2014). This confirms that the Gujarat-Melaka relationship had a far-reaching impact on the formation of Islamic societies in Southeast Asia, both spiritually and civilly.

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to describe the role of the Gujarat-Malacca trade route in the process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago by examining how economic, social, and cultural activities in the trade network function as a vehicle for the spread of Islam (Soraya et al., 2022). Next, This study seeks to analyze the forms of acculturation and adaptation of Islamic teachings that occur through the interaction between traders and local communities. Thus, this

research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between trade and the spread of Islam in the Malay world.

2. Methodology

The research method used in this article is qualitative descriptive with a library research approach. This approach was chosen because the main objective of this research is to explore and analyze the process of Islamization in the Malay world, especially through trade routes. The library research approach was chosen because the main focus of this research lies in examining the existing literature. The data sources used in this study consisted of various literary works, including articles, books, and other relevant publications that discuss similar topics. These diverse sources are used to enrich perspectives and provide a stronger scientific foundation. The data analysis technique used is content analysis, which involves analyzing and identifying the main themes of texts related to the process of Islamization in the Malay region. Through this approach, this research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how Islamization occurs. This method allows researchers to interpret the data in depth, thus presenting systematic and descriptive insights that are consistent with the goals of this research (Sugiyono, 2024; Abdussamad, 2017).

3. Results and Discussion

Islam Enters the Archipelago

Geographically, Southeast Asia is divided into maritime regions that include Timor Leste, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and the mainland region, consisting of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand (Fadhil, 2024). According to Azyumardi Azra, Islam in Southeast Asia is closely related to the maritime world, including Singapore, Malaysia, Southern Thailand (Pattani), Cambodia (Champa), the Southern Philippines (Moro), and Malaysia, as well as Indonesia. In addition, Southeast Asia occupies a strategically important location, which explains why many international traders pass through and even settle in the region. This geographical advantage significantly influenced how quickly Islamic civilization spread throughout the region because: 1). Southeast Asia is located between East and West. 2) consists of many islands connected by the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. 3) it was home to many powerful kingdoms and dynasties such as in Pattani, Brunei, Makassar, Batam, Cirebon, Malacca, Pasai, Perlak, and Srivijaya 4). it is located at the meeting point of the Southwest and Northeast monsoon winds, which unite traders in their voyages (Jamaruddin, 2016).

The introduction of Islam to the Malay Archipelago began in the 13th century through maritime trade routes connecting the Arab world, India, and the archipelago. This process takes place gradually through intense economic, social, and cultural interactions between Muslim traders and local communities. In this context, Gujarat played a major role as a major intermediary for the spread of Islam from India to Southeast Asia. Its strategic position on the west coast of India makes

Gujarat a dynamic and cosmopolitan trading center where traders from the Middle East, East Africa, and the Malay world gather (Ramadhan, 2019).

Major ports such as Cambay (Khambhat), Surat, and Bharuch became important nodes in the Indian Ocean trade network. From these ports, many ships sailed to the archipelago, including Aceh and Malacca. Muslim traders from Gujarat not only brought commodities such as textiles, metals, and spices but also introduced Islamic teachings and values. Through continuous and repeated interactions, the coastal communities of the Malay Islands began to adopt Islamic commercial ethics that emphasized honesty, trust, and justice. This process marked the beginning of Muslim communities in various major ports in the region.

In addition to their role as traders, Gujarat's merchants also acted as agents of the spread and learning of Islam. Many of them were followers of Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyya and Chishtiyya, who spread Islam through a cultural and peaceful approach. They were not only involved in trade but also established suraus (small prayer houses) and religious learning centers in ports such as Pasai and Malacca. Their preaching, which is done with wisdom, tolerance, and respect for local traditions, causes Islam to be embraced peacefully without contradicting existing cultural norms (Yatim, 2016).

The relationship between Gujarat and the Malay region can also be seen in various cultural and political aspects. The adoption of Islamic titles such as Sultan, the implementation of Sharia based trade regulations, and the development of the Jawi script all reflect the strong influence of Islamic traditions from West India. Early Malay kingdoms such as Samudera Pasai and Malacca even showed similarities in governance structure to Muslim politics in Gujarat (Hunt, 1997). This shows that the process of Islamization in the Malay world is not only carried out through the spread of religion but also through the absorption of the Islamic social and cultural system introduced by Gujarat traders (Baiti & Rozaq, 2014).

Beyond cultural and religious ties, trade routes between Gujarat and Malacca also strengthen the economic network of the Islamic world. Gujarat supplies textiles and metals to the archipelago, while Malacca exports spices and other natural products. This exchange fostered closer ties among the Islamic regions and promoted economic and spiritual solidarity between the two regions. Malacca eventually developed into an important port and Islamic missionary center in Southeast Asia, heavily influenced by Gujarat's scientific and religious traditions. Thus, Gujarat played a very strategic role in the initial process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago. Through maritime trade based on Islamic ethics and peaceful social relations, Islamic teachings spread widely and took root in Malay society. The relationship between Gujarat and Malacca not only strengthened the maritime economy but also laid the foundation for the distinct and moderate forms of Islam that characterized the Malay world (Khusnunnisa & Andriani, 2025).

Social and Cultural Factors in the Islamization Process

The process of Islamization in the Malay Islands is not solely determined by trade activities but is also greatly influenced by social and cultural factors of the local community (Basri et al., 2024). These factors include the following:

a. Wedding

The economic and social status of Muslim traders who had settled in the region gradually improved. These merchants became wealthy and respected, yet many did not bring their families with them. As a result, they often marry local women, provided that their spouses convert to Islam. This process happens smoothly and without resistance. For example, Raden Rahmat (Sunan Ampel) is married to Nyai Gede Manila, the daughter of Tumenggung Wilatikta; similarly, the marriage of King Brawijaya to Princess Jeumpa Muslim resulted in Raden Patah, who later became the first ruler of the Islamic Kingdom of Demak.

b. Politics

The rulers played an important role in the process of Islamization because of their power and influence. When a king converts to Islam, his people will usually follow him, because loyalty to the ruler is ingrained in Indonesian society. As a result, when rulers and their subjects embraced Islam, political motives often encouraged territorial expansion, which in turn facilitated the wider spread of Islam (Jannah et al., 2025).

c. Education

The rapid spread of Islam has led to the emergence of scholars and preachers who spread Islam through educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (Ulfa, 2024). This pesantren is a center where young people learn Islamic teachings. Upon completion of their studies, students are expected to teach the knowledge they have acquired to their community, leading to further Islamic conversion. Prominent early Islamic boarding schools include the Sunan Ampel Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya, founded by Raden Rahmat (Sunan Ampel), and the Sunan Giri Islamic Boarding School, whose students come from Maluku (Hitu region)(Alivia, 2025).

d. Arts and Culture

Islam also spread through various forms of art and culture, including architecture (mosques), sculpture, dance, music, and literature (Permatasari, 2021). This cultural approach is very visible in areas such as Yogyakarta, Solo, and Cirebon. Islamic cultural expressions are developed by integrating local traditions with Islamic teachings, especially monotheism (monotheism), in a simple, subtle, and harmonious way with customary customs. Examples include the dissemination of Islamic teachings through

poems and songs such as Gending Dharma, Suluk Sunan Bonang, and Hikayat Sunan Kudus (Sudarno et al., 2025).

The influence of Islam is also reflected in traditional performances that are adapted, such as wayang (shadow puppet), in which symbolic characters are reinterpreted or renamed to convey Islamic moral values. Other examples include the introduction of bedug (drum) as an adhan, replacing its previous use in traditional gatherings, and the transformation of mystical rituals into Islamic prayers, such as tahlil, which combines prayers for protection from evil spirits with prayers for deceased ancestors.

e. Sufism (Mysticism)

Sufi figures are known for their simplicity and living among local communities. They played an important role in spreading Islam by showing compassion and practical wisdom in daily life. Many Sufis have skills that benefit society while also introducing Islamic values. Prominent Sufi figures of the time included Hamzah Fansuri in Aceh and Sunan Panggung in Java. In conclusion, Islam entered the archipelago through Arab and Persian traders. However, its development is not only influenced by trade routes. Other important factors such as marriage, politics, education, art and culture, and Sufism played an important role in shaping the spread and acceptance of Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago (Alqadri & Munawwarah, 2025).

The Role of Ulama in the Process of Islamization of the Malay Archipelago

The role of ulama (Islamic scholars) during the early development of Islam in the Malay world was very significant and crucial in spreading Islamic teachings and shaping the social, political, and cultural structure of the Malay Muslim society. The scholars are not only preachers and religious teachers but also political advisors, legitimacy of royal authorities, interpreters of Islamic law (mufti), and intellectual figures who translate and adapt Islamic principles into local Malay culture (Aziz, 2015). During periods of Islamic kingdoms such as Samudera Pasai, which emerged around the 13th century, the clerics have become part of the political and administrative elite of the kingdom. They serve on fatwa councils, hold the position of mufti, and have authority that goes beyond the ministry of justice (Oktama et al., 2026). Their duties include assisting the ruler in implementing Islamic law (sharia), providing spiritual and political advice, and strengthening the legitimacy of the ruler in the eyes of his people who are beginning to embrace Islam. Therefore, the scholars in the Malay Islamic kingdoms became the central pillar in establishing an Islamic state founded on Islamic law and values, making Islam the main basis of government and social life in the Malay world. According to Fikri (2018), several scholars played a very influential role in the spread of Islam throughout the Malay Indonesian archipelago:

a. Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani

Among the most famous and influential Palembang scholars is Abd al-Samad ibn Abd Allah al-Jawi al-Palimbani, born in 1116 H/1704 M. His father was a Sayyid of Arab descent, while his mother was from Palembang. His father, who was originally from Sana'a, Yemen, traveled frequently to India and Java before settling in Kedah, on the Malay Peninsula, where he later served as qadi (judge) of the Sultanate of Kedah. Around 1112 H/1700 M, he traveled to Palembang, married a local woman, and returned to Kedah with their newborn son, Abd al-Samad. The young Al-Palimbani received his early education in Kedah and Patani before being sent by his father to continue his studies in the Arab world.

Cording to Azyumardi Azra, al-Palimbani never returned to the Malay-Indonesian territory after studying in Arabia, but he remained very concerned about the development of Islam in the archipelago (Fian, et al, 2024). He actively participated in the Jawi (Malay Indonesian) scholarly community in Haramayn (Makkah Medina) and studied with other prominent scholars such as Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari, Abdul Wahab Bugis, Abd al-Rahman al-Batawi, and Daud al Fatani. Al Palimbani wrote several important works, including Zhuhra al-Murid fi Bayan Kalimat al Tawhid (on logic and theology), Sayr al Salikin, al Nafs al Yamani wa al Ruh al Rayhani, Hidayat al-Salikin fi Suluk Maslak al Muttaqin, and Sayr al Salikin ila Ibadat Rabb al Alamin. These Malay texts became a standard reference in Islamic studies throughout the archipelago and were then translated into regional languages such as Sundanese and Javanese.

Although he never immediately returned to preach in the archipelago, al-Palimbani's influence was extensive through his writings, his role in the scholarly network of Nusantara scholars in Haramayn, and his support for the struggle against European colonial powers. His pupils included Ahmad al-Khatib al-Minangkabawi, who in turn taught Ahmad Haji Kasim (1901–1943), a prominent scholar from Negeri Sembilan. Through his disciples and writings, al-Palimbani's intellectual legacy continues to shape Islamic scholarship throughout the Malay world.

b. Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (1122–1227 H / 1710–1812 M)

Muhammad Arsyad is a descendant of Sayid Abu Bakar, the Sultan of Sulu (Mindanao). His lineage is traced back through several generations of Sayyids who have intermarried with local Malay families in Banjarmasin. He is recognized not only as a prominent figure in the network of Nusantara scholars, but also as the first scholar to establish an Islamic educational institution and introduce new religious ideas in South Kalimantan. According to Azyumardi Azra, Islam had reached the region in the early 16th century, but its expansion accelerated after the forces of the Demak Sultanate of Java assisted Prince Samudera in

his conflict with the royal court of Daha. After his victory in 1526 AD (936 H), Prince Samudera embraced Islam and became the first ruler of the Banjar Sultanate, taking the title of Sultan of Syria Shah (Suria Allah).

Although the ruler converted, Islam was not widely practiced among the population, especially the majority of the Dayaks. Sheikh Muhammad Arsyad al Banjari who revitalized Islamic life in the region. He wrote influential works such as *Sabil al Muhtadin* (on Islamic jurisprudence), *Kanz al-Ma'rifah* (on Sufism), and also mastered astronomy (*'ilm al-falaq*). In addition, he introduced the Sammaniyah Sufi order to South Kalimantan. Arsyad studied for about 30 years in Makkah and 5 years in Medina before returning to the archipelago with his fellow scholars Abdul Wahab Bugis, Abd al-Rahman al-Batawi, and Daud al Fatani. Upon his return in 1186 AH/1773 AD, he founded an Islamic learning center supported by Sultan Tahmid Allah II (r. 1773–1808), who gave him several acres of land for the construction of a school, a dormitory, a teacher's residence, and a mosque. This institution is the foundation for future generations of scholars who continue the mission of spreading Islam (da'wah).

In addition to his educational reforms, Muhammad Arsyad reorganized the judicial system of the Banjar Sultanate by establishing different religious courts, codifying Islamic legal procedures, and creating a mufti office responsible for issuing religious and social fatwas.

c. Daud bin Abd Allah al-Fatani

Daud al-Fatani, a famous scholar from Patani (southern Thailand), was born around 1153 H/1740 A.D. He received his early education in his hometown under his father's guidance and continued his studies at a local boarding school. Later, he studied in Aceh under the guidance of Muhammad Zayn bin Faqih Jalal al Din al Asyi, a prominent jurist who had previously studied in Haramayn. After two years in Aceh, al-Fatani traveled to Makkah, joining a circle of Malay scholars that included Muhammad Shalih al Fatani, Ali bin Ishaq al-Fatani, al-Palimbani, Muhammad Arsyad al Banjari, Abdul Wahab al-Bugisi, Abd al Rahman al Batawi, and Muhammad al Nafis. Although the youngest of them, al-Fatani studied under the guidance of prominent Egyptian scholars who taught in Makkah during the pilgrimage season, such as Isa bin Ahmad al Barrawi (a scholar of hadith and fiqh), al-Syarqawi (Sheikh al-Azhar, a teacher of hadith, tafsir, and jurisprudence), and Muhammad bin Ali al Syanwani, who later succeeded al-Syarqawi as Shaykh al-Azhar.

Many of his teachers were the same as his teachers al Palimbani, suggesting that these scholars had a close intellectual lineage. Although al-Fatani never returned to Patani after his studies were similar to al-

Palimbania, he produced about 57 scholarly works, which continued to be a reference for Muslims in the Malay world for centuries. The focus is to educate prospective Malay scholars in Haramayn. Among his distinguished intellectual descendants were Tok Kenali (Haji Muhammad Yusof), Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin (1869–1956) Hamka's father's teacher, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (1879–1945) and later influential figures such as Ahmad Dahlan (founder of Muhammadiyah), Hasyim Asy'ari (founder of Nahdlatul Ulama), and Haji Asnawi (leader of NU). Many of them studied in Makkah and were directly or indirectly connected to al-Fatani's scientific heritage and the network of Haramayn scholars.

In conclusion, the ulama played an important role in the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago not only through the spread of religion but also by building educational institutions, producing scientific works, and instituting Islamic law and government. Their intellectual network connecting the Malay world with the Middle East ensured that Islamic teachings were firmly rooted in local culture while retaining their universal character.

4. Conclusion

The arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago began in the 13th century through a maritime trade route connecting the Arab world, India, and the Indonesian archipelago. This process takes place gradually through intensive economic, social, and cultural interaction between Muslim traders and the local population. Gujarat plays an important and strategic role as a major hub connecting the spread of Islam from India to Southeast Asia, due to its dynamic and cosmopolitan location on the west coast of India. Through this route, Gujarat's Muslim traders not only supplied textiles and metals to the archipelago, but also introduced Islamic teachings and values, while strengthening economic networks and encouraging the spiritual solidarity of the Islamic world. Malacca later developed into a major port and center of Islamic propagation heavily influenced by Gujarat traditions. Furthermore, the process of Islamization was strengthened by social and cultural factors other than trade, including marriage, political dynamics, educational institutions, adaptation of art and culture (acculturation), and the practice of Sufism. In addition, the role of scholars (Islamic scholars) is very significant and crucial; they not only functioned as preachers and religious teachers, but also acted as political advisors, legitimators of royal authority, interpreters of Islamic law (mufti), and intellectual figures who translated and adapted the teachings of Islam into the local Malay culture, ensuring that Islam was firmly rooted in the local culture, thus laying the foundation for a different and moderate form of Islam in the Malay world.

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