

ISLAMIZATION IN CENTRAL JAVA IN THE 15TH-16TH CENTURIES: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE SPREAD OF ISLAMIC TEACHINGS BY THREE SAINTS

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Abstract: This article unravels the intricacies of the Islamization theory in the archipelago, focusing particularly on Central Java. The dissemination of Islamic teachings in the Javanese region serves as the epicentre for spreading Islam throughout the archipelago. The formation of the Wali (saints) in Java, employing the 5:3:1 ratio, is not merely about the propagation of Islam but is also carefully considered by the Wali in a well-thought-out manner in disseminating Islamic teachings. Central Java emerges as a pivotal point for the spread of Islamic teachings, with three Wali agents successfully disseminating Islam, which was well-received by the wider community. Using the historical method, this article analyzes the pattern of Islamization carried out by these agents in Central Java, succeeding with a periodization at that time. The Islam propagated by these three agents, utilizing a cultural approach, proves capable of transforming the paradigm of the Central Javanese society to embrace Islam without encountering conflict and warfare, but rather through peaceful means.

Keywords: Islamization; Islam; culture; Walisongo; Central Java; Archipelago

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengurai benang kusut teori Islamisasi di Nusantara khususnya di Jawa Tengah. Penyebaran ajaran Islam di daerah Jawa ini menjadi lokus bagi tersebarnya Islam di seluruh Nusantara. Formasi para Wali di Jawa dengan menggunakan 5:3:1 bukan hanya soal penyebaran Islam semata tetapi juga diperhitungkan secara masak-masak oleh para Wali dalam menyebarkan ajaran Islam. Jawa Tengah menjadi titik sentral bagi penyebaran ajaran Islam dengan tiga agen Wali yang berhasil menebarkan ajaran Islam sehingga diterima secara baik oleh masyarakat luas. Dengan menggunakan metode historis, artikel ini menganalisis pola Islamisasi yang dilakukan oleh para agen di Jawa Tengah berhasil dengan periodisasi pada waktu itu. Islam yang disebarkan oleh ketiga agen ini dengan menggunakan pendekatan kebudayaan ternyata mampu mengubah paradigma masyarakat Jawa Tengah untuk menerima Islam tanpa adanya pertentangan dan peperangan tetapi melalui jalan damai.

Kata kunci: Islamisasi; Islam; budaya; Walisongo; Jawa Tengah; Nusantara

Introduction

Islamic development in the Archipelago can be traced back to the 12th century AD (Ardi & Abdullah, 2018). This undeniable fact is supported by widely disseminated data and archaeological evidence meticulously examined by archaeologists and historians, shaping our understanding and study to this day. In the historical context of Islamic culture in Java, the periodization from the 15th to the 16th century is marked by the emergence of a new culture (Njoto, 2018), showcasing a synthesis of elements from Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic cultures (Makin, 2016).

Archaeological findings along the coasts and inland areas indicate that the culture described above predominantly stems from the Islamic culture that flourished during the rise and fall of the Majapahit kingdom and the establishment of the Demak Sultanate as the first Islamic Sultanate in Java (Kersten, 2017). The outcomes of this culture are inseparable from the pivotal role played by the first propagators of Islamic teachings, namely the Walisongo (Ni'am, 2015; Rukayah, 2023). The process of disseminating Islamic teachings by the Walisongo was strategically divided based on predetermined fields of *da'wah* activities.

Suryanegara (1995) explains that the *da'wah* fields undertaken by the Walisongo were based on a formation of 5:3:1. The number 5 represents the *da'wah* field in East Java, the number 3 indicates the *da'wah* field in Central Java, and the number 1 signifies the *da'wah* field in West Java. The arrangement of these numbers is not arbitrary; rather, it is purposeful. In Central Java, represented by the number 3, the Walis (saints) responsible for spreading Islam were Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Kudus, and Sunan Muria.

In the context of the process of spreading Islamic teachings in Indonesia, Benda (1992) explains that Islam did not leave a profound and uniform impact on the local population of the Archipelago due to the occurrence of syncretism between Islam and pre-Islamic values, leading to the emergence of a new religion, namely Javanese Religion. Based on such statements, it is essential to delve deeper into the fact that the Walis played a crucial role in sowing the seeds of Islam, which we continue to appreciate and study as a factual and authentic teaching, not as a new religion. This is

evident in Central Java, where numerous Islamic villages, known as "santri" villages, emerged due to the dissemination of Islamic teachings by the Walis.

Observing such statements, numerous scholars have explored the traces of Islamization in the Archipelago and Indonesia in general, with a particular focus on Central Java. However, a comprehensive study has yet to be conducted on this subject. Noteworthy research by Ghofur (2011), Choi (1996), Reid (1984), Hefner (1997), Fauzia (2017), Kuipers and Askuri (2017), and Wati (2012) exists. Despite their critical contributions to the history of Islamization, these studies have yet to specifically address Islamization in Central Java. Additionally, other researcher, such as Benda (1992), do not consider the teachings of Islam brought by the Walis as genuine Islamic teachings.

This article aims to unveil the process of Islamization in Central Java disseminated by the Walis during the 15th and 17th centuries, asserting that this is indeed genuine Islamic teaching. The prevailing pattern of Islam in Central Java, known both in the northern coastal areas and the southern inland regions, is a result of the strenuous efforts of the Walis in propagating Islamic teachings. Importantly, this did not give rise to a new synthesis in the form of a new religion known as "Agama Jawa" (Javanese Religion).

Method

This research employs a historical method consisting of five stages: selection, heuristic, verification, interpretation, and historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). The initial step involves selecting a topic derived from the issues and themes under examination. Subsequently, source collection is conducted through literature review activities. The sources utilised in this research comprise both primary and secondary sources. In the following stage, the sources are critically analysed to draw conclusions and gain new insights. The final step involves organising the research findings into an article

Results and Discussion

History of the Introduction of Islam to the Archipelago

The process of Islam entering the Archipelago has been the subject of various theories proposed by many experts. However, Islam's entry into the Archipelago generally occurred through two processes. Firstly, the indigenous population came into contact with Islam and subsequently embraced it. Secondly, foreign individuals from Asian countries such as Arabia, India, and China, who were already practising Islam, settled permanently in various regions of Indonesia through marriages and by adopting the local lifestyle. According to Ricklefs (2004), these understandings often occurred simultaneously and were inseparable.

Both processes mentioned above have been ongoing since long before the arrival of Islam in the Archipelago. Neighbouring countries engaged in trade with the Archipelago, involving the exchange of goods as the Archipelago, a maritime nation, was traversed by traders from across the seas. This activity continued, leading traders from the Middle East to come and introduce a new message in the form of Islamic teachings, which were later disseminated by "da'i" or "da'wah practitioner" a preacher or someone who engages in the act of spreading and promoting Islamic teachings. However, their mission was not one of conquest but rather of teaching and promoting peace in conveying the message of Islam.

Researchers and scholars generally agree that the entry and development of Islamic teachings in Indonesia occurred through peaceful means, even though, at times, force was used by Muslim rulers in Indonesia during the process of Islamization. The community generally embraced Islam with open arms without abandoning their previous beliefs. This approach was undertaken by the propagators of Islam, the Walisongo, who taught a form of compromise with local beliefs (Budiwanti, 2014; Fuadi et al., 2023). The author sees this as an approach and method to ensure that Islam is accepted positively by the surrounding community. However, this does not deviate from Islamic teachings, as such a form of outreach has been instructed in the Quran, the sacred scripture of the Muslim community.

In general, there are three major theories regarding the origins of the spread or introduction of Islam in Indonesia: the Gujarat, Mecca, and Persia

theories (Hāmid, 1982; Sulistiono & Muchsin, 2022; Sumarsam et al., 2023). These three prominent theories provide answers to longstanding questions within the Muslim community, particularly among academics and scholars, concerning the timing of Islam's entry into the Archipelago.

The Gujarat theory posits that Islam entered Indonesia in the 13th century, brought by individuals from Gujarat (Malik, 2008). This theory emerged around 1872, influenced by J. Pijnapel's interpretation of the travel accounts of Marco Polo (d.1324) from the 13th century and Ibn Battuta (d.1369) from the 14th century (Thaba, 1998; Amin, 1999). Pijnapel's interpretation was later reinforced by Kennet W. Morgan (d.2011), who asserted that the news of Islam entering Indonesia initially came from Marco Polo's account (d.1324), stating that the inhabitants of Perlak, a city on the northern coast of Sumatra, were Islamized by traders known as the Saracens (Djajadiningrat, 1983). This theory is supported by Hurgronje (d.1936) for several reasons. First, longstanding trade relations between Indonesia and India. Second, the oldest Islamic inscriptions in Sumatra indicate trade connections between Sumatra and Gujarat. Third, there is limited evidence of Arab contributions to the spread of Islam to the Archipelago. Hurgronje's perspective (d.1936) gained support from historians such as Moquette (d.1927) (Azra, 1999; Baiti & Razzaq, 2014), Stutterheim (d.1942), Vlekke (d.1970), Schrieke (d.1945), Geertz (d.2006), Benda (d.1971), van Leur (d.1942), and Arnold (d.1930) (Suryanegara, 2002; Thahir, 2021). Supporters of this theory assume that Islamic teachings in the Archipelago, particularly in Java, leaned towards animism and dynamism due to the blending of Hindu and Buddhist elements within its doctrines (Suryanegara, 1995). Furthermore, the Samudra Pasai kingdom's presence is evidence that Islam was indeed introduced and brought by individuals from Gujarat. Additionally, Marco Polo's account (d.1324) from Venice, who visited Perlak, mentioned the existence of a Muslim settlement and traders from India spreading Islamic teachings (Azra, 2004).

The Mecca Theory, introduced to counter the Gujarat theory prevalent among academics, emerged around 1958 through the perspectives of Western historians such as Crawfurd (d.1868), Keyzer (d.1947), and Veith (d.1945) (Azra, 1999). Syed M. Naquib al-Attas and Hamka (d.1981) are other

historians supporting this theory. The Mecca Theory asserts that Islam entered Indonesia in the 7th century, with its origin traced back to Mecca and Egypt. This argument is strengthened by evidence suggesting the existence of Islamic communities on the Sumatran coast in the 7th century, considering it a trade route since the 4th century. Furthermore, the Samudra Pasai Kingdom adopted the Shafi'i school of thought, mainly followed by Shafi'i adherents from Egypt rather than India. The titles used by the king, such as 'Al-Malik,' originated from Egypt rather than India (Hamka, 1975). Al-Attas also noted that, before the 17th century, there were no Indian Muslim authors found in relevant religious literature. He emphasized that titles like Said, Syarif, Maulana, and Muhammad, were identical to Mecca. Crucially, according to him, the values and teachings of Islam originated from the Middle East, not India (Azra, 1999). The Mecca theory is further supported by Hamka (d.1981), stating that Gujarat was not the birthplace of Islam but merely a stopover for Arab traders coming from Mecca, Yemen, and Egypt. Hamka (d.1981) argued that Mecca or Egypt is the true birthplace of Islamic teachings. He also asserted that the majority of Nusantara Muslims adhere to the Shafi'i school, just like the residents of Mecca (Suryanegara, 2002).

The Persian Theory is a perspective that has gained traction in society, suggesting that individuals from Persia brought Islam. P.A. Hoesin Djajadiningrat (d.1986) from Indonesia pioneered this Theory, focusing on his socio-cultural analysis of Indonesian Muslims, which he found similar to those in Persia. The basis of this Theory lies in the cultural similarities between Indonesian and Iranian societies, exemplified by shared practices like the commemoration of 10 Muharram or Ashura, mourning the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, which is highly revered in Iranian society. Celebrations such as Tabut and similarities in Sufi teachings embraced by Sheikh Siti Jenar during the spread of Islam by the Wali Songo with the Sufi named Mansur al-Hallaj (d.922) from Persia are also highlighted (Suryanegara, 2002). Furthermore, many Persian words are used by Muslims in Indonesia. However, these cultural parallels may not conclusively strengthen the argument regarding the introduction of Islam to the Archipelago by individuals from Persia, as it needs more scientific substantiation.

Finally, the Chinese Theory posits that Islam was not propagated through the Middle Eastern route but rather through the Chinese route. In the 9th century, Chinese Muslims in Canton and other southern regions fled to Java and some to Kedah and Sumatra. This migration occurred during the suppression of the Muslim-majority population in Canton and southern China during the Huan Chou period. Another reason cited is the presence of distinct Chinese artefacts in Javanese mosques before Middle Eastern architectural influences became prominent in Indonesian mosques (Syllabi, 2003). Additionally, long-standing trade relations between the Javanese and Chinese communities suggest the possibility that Islam entered the Archipelago through Chinese individuals.

The Chinese Theory was proposed by Muljana (1968), stating that the sultans in the Demak kingdom were of Chinese descent. He also claimed that the Wali Songo were of Chinese descent, based on a chronicle from the Sam Poo Kong Temple. Muljana (1968) pointed to Sultan Demak Panembahan Patah, an advocate of this Theory according to the Sam Poo Kong Chronicle, known as Panembahan Jin Bun. Furthermore, he referred to Arya Damar, the caretaker of Panembahan Jin Bun during his time in Palembang, who was named Swang Liong. Sultan Trenggono was mentioned as Tung Ka Lo, Sunan Gunung Jati as Toh A Bo, and Sunan Ampel as Cina Bong Swee Hoo (Suryanegara, 2010).

The process of Islamization in the Archipelago

Viewed through the framework of the four major theories on the introduction of Islam, necessitates a synthesis of various perspectives. One such effort involves establishing a periodization system for the entry of Islam into the Archipelago or the Islamization process in the region. As understood, the initiation of Islam into the Archipelago began in the 7th century CE. In contrast, the 13th century is still considered a period of the region's spread and formation of Islamic communities. The conduits for Islamic networks during the 7th to 13th centuries were individuals from Arab, Persia, and India (Poesponegoro, 1990).

Regarding Islamization in Java, Lombard (2005) broadly outlines three stages in this process. Firstly, the Islamization process along the northern coast through trade ports since the 15th century played a crucial role.

Secondly, the gradual entry of Islam into the hinterlands gave rise to a kind of Islamic bourgeoisie in the interior. Thirdly, the formation of rural Islamic networks with significant roles played by Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Sufi orders (*tarekat*). This, in the author's perspective, facilitated Indonesian Muslims during the colonial era in fulfilling their rights as Muslims to fulfil the final pillars of Islam.

Khuluq (1988) presents a more comprehensive discourse, outlining five phases of the Islamization process in Java. Firstly, Islamization was conducted by Muslim traders from India and Arabia among the local communities along the northern coast of Java. Secondly, Islamization was carried out by the *Walisongo*. Thirdly, Islamization under the Mataram Kingdom centred in the hinterlands of Java, especially during the reign of Sultan Agung. Fourthly, Islamization was marked by the proliferation of purification movements within Islam in the Archipelago during the 18th century. Fifthly, Islamization is characterized by the reform movements of Islamic organizations such as *Jami'at Khair*, *Sarekat Islam*, *Muhamamadiyah*, and others. The author perceives that the most rapid spread of Islamic teachings occurred during the era of the *Walisongo* as pioneers and disseminators of Islamic teachings. The *Walis* were not merely agents in spreading Islam but charismatic leaders. On one hand, their authority was utilized as political rulers or kings. On the other hand, irrespective of political institutionalization, they wielded strong socio-religious influence. Notably, their preaching was easily accepted by the wider community, transcending formal institutions.

Scholars generally argue that Islam in Indonesia was disseminated through the pathway of proselytization (Mokodenseho, 2020; Husda, 2017). There was no specific mission, particularly in politics, akin to the specialized missions undertaken by Protestant and Catholic entities in the early stages of their introduction in Indonesia (Mokodenseho & Zamhari, 2021). However, the Islamization development in Indonesia employed various methods, disseminated by Muslim traders peacefully, propagated by preachers and the *Walis*, particularly from India and Arabia, and spread through armed struggle against non-Muslim governments. This conflict phase ensued as Islamic kingdoms emerged and propagated Islam in other regions through warfare.

The theories mentioned above primarily address the introduction of Islam to specific islands in the Archipelago, focusing mainly on the islands of Sumatra, Aceh, and Java. These islands are considered to play a crucial role in the development of Islam in other parts of Indonesia. The theories serve as periodization tools for understanding the spread of Islamic teachings in the Archipelago, particularly in Central Java, which served as the field of proselytization for the Walisongo, especially Sunan Kalijaga, who became the key figure in assimilating Islam with Javanese culture.

Agents of Islamization in Central Java

The agents responsible for the spread of Islam in the land of Java are known as the Walisongo. These Walis (saints) represent distinct entities from ordinary humans. Acknowledging that the Walis possess exceptional qualities due to their closeness to Allah (SWT) is crucial. The Walis serve as a conduit or intermediary for the common people seeking a connection with Allah (SWT). To act as intermediaries for the general public, the Walis must meet specific requirements, primarily centred around purity.

This closeness to Allah is achieved through individual efforts, engaging in activities like dhikr (remembrance of Allah) and Riyadh (spiritual exercises) in a systematic and structured manner. The training method in *taqarubb* (spiritual closeness) will generate an aura known as purity. Furthermore, when the Walis have established closeness to Allah (SWT) and possess a pure soul, they acquire supernatural abilities beyond those of ordinary individuals. This includes the strength to comprehend religious evidence and texts, guiding towards the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) (Dhofier, 1990).

The Walisongo, as mentioned in the traditions of babads (historical chronicles), play a fascinating role as disseminators of Islam, especially when viewed in terms of their function as cultural heirs, particularly within the context of the acculturation process. On the other hand, there exists a tradition of Hindu-Buddhist palaces coexisting with emerging traditions among groups of traders and tea farmers that incorporate Islamic elements (Falakhuddin, 2017). Supporters of this new culture were mainly from the middle class, including kyais (Islamic scholars), teachers, and members of Sufi orders or *tarekat*. The Walisongo hold a significant position within the Muslim

cultural landscape in Java, particularly in the regions where their tombs are located.

The term "Walisongo," meaning nine individuals who love and are loved by Allah, serves as agents carrying the message of Islam. Most of these nine Walis were situated in coastal cities, with a small number in inland areas. Their sphere of influence was confined to the city environments that served as their bases, and only one or two of them, such as Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri, had an impact beyond their regions. The limitation to specific regions aligns with the political structure of the time, characterized by the authority of local rulers commonly referred to as Kyai Ageng (Amin & Ananda, 2019).

Despite living in different times, the Walis were strategic in their choice of locations for spreading their teachings. The selection of their preaching sites was also influenced by strategic factors and the conditions of their time. Observing the division of their work territories among the nine Walis reveals a well-thought-out geostrategic foundation, with a ratio of 5:3:1. The region of East Java received significant attention from the Walis, with 5 Walis assigned to various territorial divisions. Maulana Malik Ibrahim, the pioneering Wali, took charge of the Gresik area. After his passing, it was taken over by Sunan Giri. Sunan Ampel worked in the Surabaya region, Sunan Bonang in Tuban, and Sunan Drajat in Sedayu. In Central Java, Wati (2012) states that the Walis positioned themselves in Demak, Kudus, and Muria.

The target audience for the preaching of the Walis in Central Java was undoubtedly different from those in East Java. In Central Java, the centre of Hindu and Buddhist political power no longer played a significant role. Only the Walis recognized that the reality of the society was still influenced by cultural elements derived from Hindu-Buddhist traditions. Currently, the Walis acknowledge Wayang (traditional Javanese puppetry) as a significant communication medium with a profound influence on the mindset of the people. Therefore, they deemed it necessary to modify Wayang in form and content.

The placement of these three locations not only served to disseminate Islamic teachings for Central Java but also functioned as a central hub for the spread throughout Central Indonesia (Cahyani, 2022). During the activities of these three Walis, the centre of political and economic power shifted to

Central Java due to the collapse of the Majapahit kingdom following the Kediri invasion, giving rise to the Sultanate of Demak, subsequently leading to the Sultanates of Pajang and Mataram Islam. Such political changes allowed these three locations to have decisive geostrategic significance.

Sunan Kalijaga, the Wali of Java who was closely connected with the Javanese community, also known as Muhammad Said or Joko Said, had a remarkable ability to integrate Islamic influence into Javanese customs. Due to the Javanese people's deep attachment to Wayang (traditional Javanese puppetry), Sunan Kalijaga incorporated Islamic stories into Wayang performances. He became legendary for his skill in creating one of the Saka Masjid in Demak using wooden materials. According to Hamka (1975), Sunan Kalijaga is considered the creator of Wayang Kulit, and his influence on Wayang books contains dramatic and Islamic-themed stories.

Sunan Muria, also known as Raden Prawoto, was a Sufi or a master of tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism) who imparted knowledge of tasawwuf to his disciples (Mundakir, 2020). Sunan Muria had a personal connection with his love for Allah SWT (Hadi, 2022). Throughout his life, Sunan Muria devoted himself to praising the greatness of Allah SWT. His residence was at the foot of Mount Muria, overseeing the safety of the Northern Coast (Sukardi, 2015). Under Sunan Muria's guidance, his followers engaged in dhikr (remembrance of Allah), and he always expressed pure words of thoyibah and risalah. In spreading Islamic teachings, Sunan Muria adopted an approach similar to Sunan Kalijaga's, preserving existing traditions but imbuing them with Islamic essence.

Similarly, Sunan Kudus, also known as Ja'far Shadiq, served as a prominent religious figure spreading Islam in Central Java. He was recognized as a scholar proficient in various fields such as hadith, Quranic exegesis (tafsir), literature, logic (mantiq), and jurisprudence (fiqh). Among the Walisongo, Sunan Kudus was bestowed with the title Waliyul Ilmi, emphasizing his expertise in knowledge. As a preacher who appreciated local wisdom, Sunan Kudus often conveyed Islamic teachings through literary forms like tembang (Javanese traditional songs), specifically in the forms of maskumambang and mijil. Moreover, Sunan Kudus facilitated mass conversion during the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (maulid) by

leading the community to recite the two testimonies of faith, known in Javanese as Sekaten (Amin & Ananda, 2019).

Through the efforts of these three Walis in Central Java, particularly in the city of Demak, which became the first Islamic kingdom, the region is often referred to as the city of Walis, signifying the success of Islam's acceptance by the people of Central Java. The widespread enthusiasm of the population towards Islam during that period indicates the open reception of the religion (Pratama, 2017). The achievements of these three Walis in propagating Islam in both the northern coastal areas (Pantura) and the southern hinterlands mark a significant transformation in social and religious aspects during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Conclusion

The process of the entry and dissemination of Islam is marked by a chronological framework established by scholars and historians. Periodization indicates how Islam made its presence felt in the diverse and culturally rich society of Nusantara (the Indonesian archipelago). The widespread acceptance of Islam in Nusantara is attributed to courageous agents who pioneered innovative breakthroughs, fostering the assimilation of Islamic teachings with local cultures. This adaptation allowed Islamic teachings to be embraced by various communities in Nusantara. The focus of Islamic propagation during the 15th to 16th centuries primarily centred on Sumatra, particularly in Aceh and Java. In Java, the dissemination of Islamic teachings was concentrated and strategically carried out by a group known as Walisongo, adopting a formation with a locus of 5:3:1. In Central Java, three prominent figures, namely Sunan Muria, Sunan Kudus, and Sunan Kalijaga, played pivotal roles in spreading Islamic teachings tailored to their respective locations. These three Walis acted as agents in propagating Islam in Central Java, contributing significantly to the widespread acceptance of Islam among the Javanese population, both in the northern coastal areas (Pantura) and the southern hinterlands.

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