

Islamization In Southeast Asia: History And Development In Southeast Asian Countries

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Abstract

Islam is a rapidly growing religion in Southeast Asia, spreading through trade, proselytization, marriage, and cultural assimilation. This study aims to examine the history of Islam's arrival in the region, its development across various ASEAN countries, and the differing conditions faced by Muslims in each nation. Using a qualitative approach through literature review, it was found that Islam first entered Southeast Asia in the 7th century CE via Arab, Persian, and Indian traders. Indonesia, as the initial center for the spread of Islam, became the country with the largest Muslim population in the region, followed by Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. However, the development of Islam in countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Myanmar has faced significant challenges due to political conflicts, cultural differences, and discrimination against Muslim minorities. In addition to trade and marriage, methods of proselytization such as education, art, and Sufism also played a crucial role in the process of Islamization. This study highlights the differing social and political dynamics influencing the application of Islamic law and the lives of Muslims in each Southeast Asian country. Consequently, this research provides an in-depth understanding of the history and development of Islam and its role in shaping the region's identity.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Islamization, History and Development

Abstrak

Islam adalah agama yang berkembang pesat di Asia Tenggara melalui jalur perdagangan, dakwah, perkawinan, dan akulturasi budaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji sejarah masuknya Islam ke kawasan tersebut, perkembangannya di berbagai negara ASEAN, serta perbedaan kondisi yang dihadapi oleh umat Muslim di setiap negara. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi literatur, ditemukan bahwa Islam pertama kali masuk ke Asia Tenggara pada abad ke-7 M melalui pedagang Arab, Persia, dan India. Indonesia, sebagai pusat awal penyebaran Islam, menjadi negara dengan populasi Muslim terbesar di kawasan ini, diikuti oleh Malaysia dan Brunei Darussalam. Namun, perkembangan Islam di negara-negara seperti Thailand, Filipina, dan Myanmar menunjukkan tantangan signifikan akibat konflik politik, perbedaan budaya, serta diskriminasi terhadap minoritas Muslim. Selain faktor perdagangan dan perkawinan, metode dakwah seperti pendidikan, seni, dan tasawuf turut memainkan peran penting dalam proses islamisasi. Penelitian ini menyoroti perbedaan dinamika sosial dan politik yang memengaruhi penerapan hukum Islam dan kehidupan Muslim di masing-masing negara di Asia Tenggara. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini memberikan wawasan mendalam tentang sejarah dan perkembangan Islam serta peranannya dalam membentuk identitas kawasan.

Kata Kunci: Asia Tenggara, Islamisasi, Sejarah dan Perkembangan

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion spread by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH which has the character of *ramatan lil-alamiin*. Islamic law can be interpreted in various dimensions, namely the abstract dimension and the concrete dimension. The abstract dimension can be seen from the form of all the commandments and prohibitions of Allah and His Messenger. The concrete dimension can be observed through the consistent behavior pattern of Muslims in carrying out the commands of Allah and His Messenger both individually and collectively¹.

The development of Islamic law in various parts of the world is very rapid not only in eastern countries, but the development of Islamic law has spread to other countries such as countries in Southeast Asia². Southeast Asia consists of several countries, namely: Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Timor Leste. These countries are members of an organization called ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).³

Southeast Asia has the largest Muslim population. The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center (RISSC) report entitled *The Muslim 500 2023* edition shows that the number of Muslim populations in Indonesia has reached 237,558,000 people. This number is the highest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, as well as globally. In Malaysia, Muslims number 19,840,357. In the Philippines there are 6,127,000 Muslims. In Thailand, Muslims number 3,769,199 people. In Myanmar, Muslims number 2,339,621. In Singapore, Muslims number 912,653. In Brunei Darussalam, Muslims number 353,921 people. In Cambodia, Muslims number 334,379. In Vietnam, Muslims number 97,339. In Laos, Muslims number 7,276 people. In East Leste there are 1,318 Muslims.

Based on data that shows that the number of Muslims in Southeast Asia is so large compared to other regions in the world, the statement that the development of Islam in Southeast Asia is quite massive is not wrong. However, in reality, the development of Islam in Southeast Asia is not even in every country. There are countries in Southeast Asia whose Islamic development is quite rapid, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. However, other countries in Southeast Asia do not have the same conditions in the development of Islam. Thus, the author seeks to examine the development of Islam in Southeast Asia, within the scope of discussing the development of Islam in Southeast Asia, starting from the entry of Islam in Southeast Asia and the situation of Muslims in Southeast Asian countries

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, the author uses a literature study or literature study with a qualitative approach. The author collects bibliographies related to the focus of research, data collection techniques with library methods, while data presentation is carried out in a qualitative way. Danandjaja explained that what is meant by bibliography in the literature method is a written work that summarizes science along with the necessary data, as well as analyzes books, articles or other materials related to the discussion. Then an analysis of the data that has been collected is carried out by organizing and presenting data. Then,

¹ Ahmad Fathoni, *Social History of Islamic Law in Southeast Asia; A Study on the Enforcement and Codification of Islamic Law in Malaysia*, *Ash-Shari'ah* Vol. 16 No. 3, 2014.

² Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *The Development of Islamic Law Today in ASEAN Countries*, *Rayah Al-Islam* Vol. 7 No. 2, 2023.

³ Wiwid Hadi Sumitro, *The Transformation of Islamic Studies in New Arab Southeast Asia and Future Challenges*, *Tadzakkur* Vol. 6 No. 1.

the author interprets the data based on the research objectives so that it is able to answer the research problems obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History of the Entry of Islam into Southeast Asia

Islam entered Southeast Asia through a peaceful process that lasted for centuries. The spread of Islam in the region occurred without political upheaval or through the expansion of liberation involving military force, political upheaval or the imposition of power structures and societal norms from abroad. Rather, Islam entered through trade, marriage, da'wah and the blending of Muslim, Arab, Persian and Indian communities with indigenous communities.⁴

In line with the above, Thomas W. Arnold concluded in his work "The Preaching of Islam" that the spread and development of Islam in Southeast Asia is going⁵ peacefully. Azyumaridi, as Wiwid argues, argues that Islam in Southeast Asia spread in a different way to the expansion of Islam in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, which in Islamic literature in the Middle East is called Fath (or Futuh). Although futuh in these places is not always in the form of forcing the locals to embrace Islam. In contrast, in Southeast Asia, the spread of Islam has never been defined as a futuh accompanied by military force⁶.

In the context of the entry of Islam into Southeast Asia, there are four main opinions that show that there is a debate related to the spread, arrival, and Islamization, namely:

a. Indian Theory

This theory explains that the development of Islam in Southeast Asia began in India. This theory is carried by several researchers. However, the groups supporting this theory still differ on which region in India is the origin of Islam. Differences of opinion between them arise based on different interpretations and historical evidence used. Pijnappel is the originator of this theory. He is of the view that the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia is related to the Shafi'i madhhab of Gujarat and Malabar. However, according to Pijnappel the early da'i who spread Islam were not Indians, but Arabs from Gujarat and Malabar. In line with Pijnappel, Hurgonje argued that the Muslims of Decca were treated as middlemen in the trade of Muslim countries of the Near East and the archipelago. After the merchants Islamized through trade routes, only then did the Arabs complete da'wah. According to Hurgonje, the year 1200 was the initial period for the Islamization of the archipelago⁷.

b. Arabian Theory

In Indian theory, Malabar and Coromandel are considered to be the origin of Islam in Southeast Asia, but Islam also originated directly from Arabia. According to Amin and Rifki, as quoted by Oktia and Seprina, Arab traders participated in introducing Islam in the 7th-8th centuries AD. This assumption is supported by Chinese sources who say that an Arab trader became the leader of an Arab Muslim settlement on the coast of Sumatra in the late quarter of the 7th century.

⁴ Wiwid Hadi Sumitro, *The Transformation of Islamic Studies in New Arab Southeast Asia and Future Challenges*, Tadzakkur Vol. 6 No. 1, 71.

⁵ T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of The Propagation of The Muslim Faith*, 1896.

⁶ Wiwid Hadi Sumitro, *The Transformation of Islamic Studies in New Arab Southeast Asia and Future Challenges*, Tadzakkur Vol. 6 No. 1, 72.

⁷ Faizal Amin and Rifki Abror Amanda, *The Arrival and Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Theoretical Study of the Process of Islamization of the Archipelago*, *Analysis: Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 18 No. 2, 2018. 67-100

c. Persian theory

According to this theory, the spread of Islam began in Persia, not from India or Arabia. This is based on the similarity of Persian culture, especially Shi'a teachings, with Islamic religious culture in the Indonesian archipelago. However, this theory is refuted by Saifuddin Zuhri on the grounds that Islam first entered the archipelago in the 7th century era or the era of the authority of the Umayya Banu in the Arab world. Thus, the idea that Islam originated in Persia becomes absurd.

d. Cina theory

The basis of this theory has similarities with the Persian theory, namely the similarity of Chinese state culture with aspects of Islamic civilization that developed in the archipelago. H.J de Graaf is of the view that there are indications of the role of the Chinese people in the spread of Islam in the archipelago. In addition, Denys Lombard stated that Chinese culture has an influence on the daily lives of Indonesian people, including food, clothing, communication, artistic expression, architecture, and even other things⁸.

Based on these theories, it can be concluded that Islam first entered Southeast Asia through the state of Indonesia. This indicates that the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia began in Indonesia and then spread to other countries in Southeast Asia. This is based on historical evidence that is widely found in Indonesia. From these various theories, many researchers argue that Islam has entered Southeast Asia since the first century Hijri or the 7th century AD, Arnold's opinion is based on several Chinese sources that mention that at the end of the third century Hijri (7th century AD), an Arab merchant became the leader of an Arabian Muslim village on the coast of Sumatra. Some of these Arab traders reportedly married local women, forming the core of the Islamic community consisting of Arab immigrants and locals.

The process of Islamic entry in Southeast Asia did not occur at the same time even though it was spread throughout time and was not evenly distributed in all parts. The political and socio-cultural conditions of the people in various regions of Southeast Asia were also different at that time. For example, in the 13th century AD, the authorities in North Sumatra, which is now Aceh, had embraced Islam. At the same time, the dominance of government in East Java is still in the hands of the leadership of Shiva and Buddhists, namely in the Kediri and Singosari Kingdoms. The city of Majapahit, the capital city which later became the center of great power, was only established in that century. The establishment of the Denmak Kingdom, which was dominated by Islamic views, only occurred in line with the weakening of the power and influence of the Majapahit Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom.

The Long Journey of the Process of Spreading Islam in Southeast Asia

The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia is considered to have occurred a lot through trade and marriage. Traders from Arabia are believed to have started spreading Islam along with buying and selling activities. In addition, they were also recorded as having marriages with indigenous women. The formation of mixed households led to the birth of a Muslim community from the unity of Arab tribes and indigenous tribes which was felt to play an important role in the spread of Islam. It can be interpreted that social relations are one of the foundations of Islamic da'wah in various places.

⁸ Reni Oktia and Reka Seprina, *Islamization in Southeast Asia: The Process of Arrival, Personality and Characteristics of Islam in Southeast Asia*, Al-Kawakib Vol. 5 No. 1, 2024, 15-16.

In addition, the reason why Islam in Southeast Asia spread so easily is because the teachings that Islam carries emphasize tolerance and equality of human beings. The values of equality and brotherhood spread by Islam are a special attraction that encourages people to embrace Islam.⁹

Islam entered Southeast Asia through several ways that according to Uka Tjandrasasmita as described by Hairus Saleh are as follows¹⁰:

a. Trade

In the initial stage, the process of entering Islam was through trade. The busy trade traffic in the 7th to 16th centuries led Muslim traders (Arabs, Persians and Indians) to take part in trade from the Western, Southeast and Eastern countries of the Asian continent. This channel of Islamization through trade was very profitable because kings and nobles participated in trading activities and even they became owners of ships and shares. So that civilization gradually began to develop, for example, they succeeded in establishing mosques.

b. Marriage

From an economic point of view, Muslim merchants had a better social status than the indigenous peoples, so the natives, especially the princesses of the nobility, were interested in becoming the wives of the merchants. Before getting married, they were converted to Islam first. After they had descendants, their environment became more extensive, finally villages and regions were formed and even Muslim kingdoms were formed.

c. Sufism

With Sufism, the form of Islam taught to the indigenous population has similarities with the state of mind of those who previously adhered to Hinduism, so that the new religion is easy to understand and accept. Mystical teachings like this were still developed in the 19th century AD and even in the 20th century AD.

d. Education

Islamization is also carried out by means of education, both pesantren and boarding schools organized by religious teachers, kiai-kiai and ulama. After leaving the pesantren, they return to their respective villages or preach to certain places and teach Islam.

e. Art

Islamization through the most famous art is puppet shows. It is said that Sunan Kalijaga is the most proficient figure in suppressing puppetry. Most of the puppet stories are still taken from the stories of Mahabrata and Ramayana, but in the stories are inserted the teachings of the names of Islamic heroes. Other arts are also used as tools of Islamization such as literature, stories, chronicles and so on.

f. Politics

The king's political influence greatly helped the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. In addition, for political gain, Islamic governments fought against non-Muslim governments. The victorious government of the Islamic kingdom politically attracted many non-Muslim working people to convert to Islam.

⁹ Reni Oktia and Reka Seprina, Islamization in Southeast Asia: The Arrival Process, Personality and Characteristics of Islam in Southeast Asia, *Al-Kawakib* Vol. 5 No. 1, 2024, 17-18.

¹⁰ Hairus Saleh, Historical Dynamics and Distinction of Southeast Asian Islam, *Journal of Islamic History* Vo. 1 No. 2, 2021. 176.

The Development of Islam in Southeast Asia

After the collapse of the unity of Islamic civilization centered in Baghdad in 1258 AD, seven branches of Islamic civilization were born, namely Arab Islamic civilization, Persian Islam, Turkish Islam, Black African Islam, Indian subcontinental Islam, Malay Islam, and Chinese Islam¹¹. Azyumardi Azra is of the view that the process of spreading Islam in Southeast Asia is more real after the 12th century. According to him, Arnold's opinion that Islam spread in Southeast Asia in the first centuries of the Hijri shows that the phase of introduction to Islam and the influence of Islam expanded between the 12th and 16th centuries¹².

Islamic legal thought in Southeast Asian countries generally follows the course of their respective histories¹³. The explanation related to the development of Islam in Southeast Asian countries is as follows:

a. The Development of Islam in Indonesia

Discussions related to Islam in Indonesia are inseparable from the legal system that lives and develops following the flow of human civilization. The law in Indonesia can be observed from several things, first, laws that come from customs. Second, the law is derived from religion, and the third is the law as a whole between the common life of official legislators accompanied by certain sanctions. Islamic law in Indonesia has a very important position and meaning. According to the theory of Lodelijk Willem Christian Van Den Berg, Indonesian Muslims have accepted all Islamic law as a unit in the sense that the law develops in line with the religious rules they adhere to.

b. The Development of Islam in Malaysia

The Islamization that occurred in Malaysia is believed to have taken place through the trade process due to the role of Muslim traders and missionaries from Arabia and Gujarat. The implementation of Islamic law in Malaysia, as seen from the codification carried out which has gone through three phases, namely, First, the Malay Period, the earliest legal codification is contained in the Trengganu inscription written in the Jawi script, containing a short list of recognizing ten rules and for those who violate them will be punished. Second, the British colonial period. In this phase, the position of Islamic law as the basis of the state changes. The administration of Islamic law is limited only to the issue of Akwal Shakhsiyyah and some issues of religious violations. Third, the independence period. In this phase, the influence of English law still has a strong impact. However, in some states new regulations have been enacted that contain the administration of Islamic law. This is intended to create a constitutional basis for the Islamic Religious Assembly, the Department of Religious Affairs, and the Sharia Court.¹⁴

c. The Development of Islam in Brunei Darussalam

Islam is believed to have entered Brunei since the 7th century, because its government system is based on Islamic values. Islam is the basic principle of kings and sultans in carrying out their government process, so that the regulations and laws

¹¹ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *The Development of Islamic Law Today in ASEAN Countries*, Rayah Al-Islam Vol. 7 No. 2, 2023.

¹² Wiwid Hadi Sumitro, *The Transformation of Islamic Studies in New Arab Southeast Asia and Future Challenges*, Tadzakkur Vol. 6 No. 1, 73.

¹³ Juhaya S. Praja, *Legal Evidence Between Western Madzhab and Islam* (Tasikmalaya: IALM, 2015), 76.

¹⁴ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *The Development of Islamic Law Today in ASEAN Countries*, Rayah Al-Islam Vol. 7 No. 2, 2023, 616.

that apply are codified in one form, namely the qonun Brunei. This top-down pattern, from the king or sultan to his people, made it easier for Islam to develop in Brunei¹⁵.

In the preamble to the Law of the Canon of Brunei, it is stated that the content of this law is a custom that is upheld and inherited from generation to generation. The purpose of making this law is to guide and set an example for sultans, viziers, and ministers in running the government for the benefit of the people. Brunei established the Shafi'i madhhab as the official madhhab of the country. This cannot be separated from the influence of the Indonesian state, which is the majority of madzhab shafi'i. Brunei Shari'ah Courts are only allowed to enforce Islamic Law on certain matters, namely marriage, divorce, and (special) worship. As for the jinayah, it is submitted to the English Law which is based on the Common Law of England.¹⁶

d. The development of Islam in Thailand

During the Thai kingdom, in terms of politics, Muaghtai Muslims were under the rule of Chulalongkorn (in 1902), although culturally Muanghtai Muslims were part of the Malay nation, especially the geographical location where they bordered Malay countries. Muaghtai Muslims actually prefer to join Malaysia rather than join the Thai kingdom, because that way they can live with a society of the same religion, language, and nation. It was only since the 1990s that the Malay Muslim community began to have the freedom to carry out Islamic law. However, their desire to enforce Islamic law in their territory must still be fought for. As a minority, Muslims in Southern Thailand, especially in the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, are confronted by several circumstances that make it difficult for them to enforce Islamic law: first, the political conflict that occurs between them and Thai Buddhists. Second, the strong role of the army in Thailand makes many facilities such as education, jobs, and government facilities difficult for Muslims to enjoy¹⁷.

e. The Development of Islam in the Philippines

The Philippines is a country with a majority Catholic population in Southeast Asia. The Muslim population in the Philippines is a minority group faced with the challenge of maintaining their religion. However, the southern part of the Philippines is a region with a majority Muslim population. The process of Islam entering the Philippines went through three routes, namely: trade, politics, and marriage, until it was finally accepted by the people of Mindanao, Maniland, Sulu, and people on the coast of the Philippine islands. However, Filipino Muslims, known as the Moro as a minority group, do not receive good treatment from their country. Instead, they are faced with government policies that are impartial to them¹⁸.

f. The development of Islam in Myanmar

Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority country. The first generation of Muslims who came to Myanmar began in the 9th century. The Muslim population in Myanmar had increased during the British colonial period, due to the large migration of Indian Muslims to Myanmar. However, this population declined further after the signing of the India-Myanmar treaty in 1941. The Rohingya are the indigenous people of the

¹⁵ Fikria Najtama, "The Development of Islam in Brunei", *tasamuh, Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2018, 407-421.

¹⁶ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *Developments in Islamic Law today in ASEAN Countries*, 2023, 619.

¹⁷ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *Current Development of Islamic Law in ASEAN Countries*, 2023, 621.

¹⁸ Hasaruddin, "The Development of Islamic Societies in the Philippines", *Al Ma'arief: Journal of Social and Cultural Education* Vol. 1 No. 1, 2019, 32-43.

country like the diverse Arakan of Islam. The Myanmar government discriminated against the Rohingya ethnic group, one of which was that when the Burmese nation celebrated independence in 1948, only the Rovingya ethnic group was not invited as a representative of Muslims. Subsequently, the Myanmar government expressly established the Emergency Immigration Law in 1974 which abolished the citizenship of the Rohingya followed in 1982 through the Myanmar Citizenship Regulation, in which Myanmar removed the Rohingya from the list of eight major ethnicities. According to a report by Indonesia-based PIARA, until now the population of Rohingya Muslims in Arakan, Myanmar is approximately one million people. Hundreds of thousands of others live in refugee camps in various countries¹⁹.

g. The development of Islam in Singapore

The process of Islam entering Singapore coincided with the development of Islam in Malacca. The pedangangs who came from Malabar and Colomander, as well as Hadramaut became the beginning of Islamization in Singapore. Traders from Hadramaut came in 1824 AD, but there was already a mosque built around 1820 AD²⁰.

However, the Muslim community that is a minority in the developed country of Singapore does not live on an equal economic standard with its non-Muslim compatriots. In addition, in the field of education, even though it has an advanced system, the Muslim population is still lagging behind. Another problem related to efforts to develop Islam is the government's lack of attention to the implementation of Islamic teachings, such as the ban on wearing the hijab issued by Lee Hsien Long, Deputy Prime Minister²¹.

In three Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, Islam is the majority religion. This situation is an important factor in the social, cultural, political and educational processes. This great influence has an impact on the strategic position of religion which often enters the unlimited public realm. As a purpose in life, Islam has an influence on various aspects of life, such as socio-cultural, economic, political, and other aspects.

Meanwhile, in non-Muslim-majority countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar and Singapore, Muslims struggle with various challenges and conditions they face to maintain their faith and identity. The conditions that occur in these countries show the variations and dynamics of Islam that emerge as a result of the response and socio-political conditions of each country²².

CONCLUSION

The process of Islamic entry in Southeast Asia did not occur at the same time even though it was spread throughout time and was not evenly distributed in all parts. The political and socio-cultural conditions of the people in various regions of Southeast Asia were also different at that time. Some of the ways taken in spreading Islam in Southeast Asia include: Trade, Marriage, Sufism, Education, Arts, and Politics. The development

¹⁹ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *Developments in Islamic Law today in ASEAN Countries*, 2023, 625.

²⁰ Fabian Fadhly, "Islamic Religious Understanding in Southeast Asia in the XIII-XX Centuries", *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 18 No. 1, 2018, 55-78.

²¹ Rahmad Fauzi Salim and Zainul Fuad, *Current Development of Islamic Law in ASEAN Countries*, 2023, 626.

²² Wiwid Hadi Sumitro, *The Transformation of Islamic Studies in New Arab Southeast Asia and Future Challenges*, *Tadzakkur* Vol. 6 No. 1, 78.

of Islam in Southeast Asia is influenced by various aspects such as socio-political, economic and also cultural. In some regions such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, Islam became the majority religion that had a positive influence on its development. As for Muslim minority countries, Muslims must make great efforts to maintain their identity and beliefs.

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