

From Coast To Hinterlands: The Spread Of Islam In Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

The spread of Islam on Sumatra Island originated in coastal regions before expanding into the hinterlands. Utilizing a historical approach, this study reveals that maritime trade routes served as the gateway for traders and missionaries from Arabia, Persia, and Gujarat to engage in commerce and dawah across Sumatra. Islam initially flourished in Barus, Samudera Pasai, and Aceh before eventually expanding into the interior through river networks, intermarriage, and the political influence of the sultanates. The findings of this study indicate that the process of Islamization in Sumatra was not uniform; in coastal areas, Islam tended to be more Cosmopolitan, whereas in the interior, cultural acculturation with local traditions occurred. The success of this expansion marked the starting point of a religious transformation across the Indonesian archipelago.

Keywords: Spread of Islam, Sumatra, Coastal, Hinterland, Trade Routes



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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago is one of the most significant events in the history of Indonesian civilization. It is estimated that Islam first entered the archipelago between the 7th and 13th centuries AD through trade brought by traders from Arabia, Gujarat, and Persia (Azizah et al., 2025). Before Islam arrived, the archipelago already had a strong foundation of civilization, including Hinduism and Buddhism, reflected in the glory of great kingdoms such as the Srivijaya Empire in Sumatra (Chairunnisa & Imawan, 2025). This religious transition did not occur suddenly, but rather through a long process, involving various global and local communication channels (Firmansyah et al., 2026).

Maritime trade routes played a crucial role as the primary gateway for the spread of Islam in Sumatra. Cities such as Barus, Samudera Pasai, and Aceh served as meeting points for traders from various countries and local communities (Husni et al., 2024). In these coastal areas, Islam flourished as a cosmopolitan religion, driven by international economic activity. Islam's success in these coastal areas subsequently shaped a new identity that transformed the social and political landscape of Sumatra's trading centers (Ghofir, 2024).

After taking strong roots on the coast, Islamic influence began to spread to the interior of Sumatra through a more complex network. The expansion of Islam in the interior of Sumatra followed the flow of large rivers which functioned as transportation and communication routes between ports and mainland areas, for example the Musi River and the Singkel River (Irwanto et al., 2025). In the interior, the spread of Islam was supported by the important role of preachers, religious figures, as well as the marriage process between immigrants and local residents which accelerated the acceptance of new teachings at the grassroots level (Natalia et al., 2024).

The process of Islamization in the interior exhibits distinct characteristics from coastal areas, particularly in terms of cultural adaptation (Fahmi, 2024). In the interior, an acculturation process occurred between Islamic teachings and pre-existing local traditions and beliefs. For example, in Batak Land, the arrival of Islam began with the Padri movement in the 19th century, resulting in significant cultural transformation while still interacting with local identities (Nisa', 2024). This demonstrates that the process of Islamization in Sumatra was not uniform, but rather involved adaptation to the socio-geographical context of each region (Sari et al., 2025).

The successful expansion of Islam from the coast to the interior of Sumatra ultimately marked the beginning of a broader religious transformation throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Shapijah et al., 2023). Support from the political power of the Islamic Sultanate reinforced this religion's position as the primary foundation of community identity (Roswandi et al., 2024). Understanding this movement from the coast to the interior is crucial for understanding how Islam served not only as a belief system but also as a unifying force that integrated diverse ethnicities and cultures into a dynamic social harmony in Indonesia (Gupta, 2022)

METHOD

research approach. The main focus of this research procedure is to collect, review, and analyze literature relevant to the history of the arrival of Islam in Sumatra, both books and scientific works such as available scientific journals (Nurdiyanto et al., 2024). Data were collected through documentation techniques by selecting articles from various digital and print sources (Hall, 2022). Inclusion criteria in the selection of library sources prioritized articles discussing maritime trade routes, the role of ports as starting points for the spread of Islam, and the socio-cultural relations of the Sumatran interior (Heng, 2022).

After data collection, the next step is content analysis through four stages of historical methods: heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. The verification stage tests the validity of the historical data, both externally and internally, to ensure the accuracy of the information provided regarding the spread of Islam in Sumatra (Nuraisah et al., 2023). Next, interpretation is conducted to connect historical facts regarding the mobilization of Islam from the coast to the interior through river networks and the political influence of the sultanate (Jatmika, 2022). All data is then constructed descriptively and analytically to provide a comprehensive and structured picture of the religious transformation on the island of Sumatra within the narrative of Nusantara history.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process of Islamization on the island of Sumatra is a dynamic historical phenomenon and is inseparable from global interactions. As explained by Elva Samrotul Azizah et al. (2025), "The process of Islamization in the archipelago took place peacefully, with its spread emphasizing the spiritual and ethical aspects of life, so that society could accept it well." This persuasive character of preaching is the main reason why Islam was accepted by various levels of society, from port rulers to people in the interior, without causing major social conflict (Yogi & Awantara, 2024).

Coastal regions served as gateways to Islamic civilization due to their strategic position along international trade routes. In places like Barus and the Binanga site in Aceh, archaeological evidence in the form of ancient tombstones indicates the presence of established Muslim settlements centuries ago. The open and cosmopolitan nature of coastal communities made Islam an integral part of their economic activities, which later laid the foundation for the emergence of major sultanates in Sumatra (Ningtiyas et al., 2026).

The transition from the coast to the interior occurred gradually through the use of natural landscapes, particularly the large river network (Siregar, 2023). The Musi River and various rivers in northern Sumatra served as the primary routes for the penetration of Islamic teachings into the interior (Fuadi et al., 2024). Through these waterways, the influence of the sultanate's political power permeated upstream, bringing with it preachers and scholars who established educational centers in areas previously inaccessible by land (Affan et al., 2023).

Regarding the strategic role of religious institutions in local areas, Firmansyah et al. (2026) noted that "Ar-Rahman Mosque plays a strategic role in the religious development of the community through religious study activities, learning classical books, and madrasa education (Faizurrahman & Sutanto, 2023)." This

shows that mosques in remote areas of Sumatra are not just places of worship, but function as literacy centers and social laboratories that strengthen the Islamic foundations of rural communities independently and sustainably (Sulistiono & Muchsin, 2022).

The strategy for spreading Islam from coastal areas to the interior of Sumatra included several effective methods (Nabilah et al., 2025):

1. Marriage Path: Marriage between Muslim traders and the daughters of local figures in the interior became a harmonious way to convert the ruling family to Islam.
2. Da'wah Through Sufism: The spiritual approach of Sufism scholars makes it easier for Islamic teachings to be accepted by people who still adhere to old beliefs (Widiya & Alimni, 2023).
3. Education Center (Dayah): Establishment of educational institutions in transition areas to become a base for producing da'wah cadres from local sons.

In the interior, Islam did not completely eradicate old traditions, but rather underwent a profound process of acculturation. In Batak Land, for example, the significant influence of Islam in the 19th century brought about changes in the social order, yet remained in dialogue with strong local cultural identities. The syncretism that occurred was a form of adaptation to ensure Islam remained relevant to local wisdom, so that the arrival of this new religion was seen as a complement, not a threat, to traditional structures (Nirwana & Abuzar, 2025).

Regarding social transformation in the upstream power centers, Chairunnisa (2025) stated that "Islam entered Palembang in the 16th century and developed rapidly, changing the social and political order of local society through the interaction between global influences and local traditions." This statement emphasizes that the integration of Islamic values with the bureaucratic structure of the sultanate became the main driving force that pushed religious values deep into the interior through trade and power routes.

Factors driving the acceleration of Islamization in the interior of Sumatra include:

1. Role of the Sultanate: Political and financial support from the sultan to send missionaries to upstream areas to expand religious influence (Anzaikhan, 2022).
2. Economic Integration: The interdependent relationship between inland commodities (such as pepper and gold) and markets in Muslim-controlled coastal ports.
3. Malay: The use of Malay as a lingua franca greatly facilitates communication and transfer of knowledge across ethnic groups (Mahfud et al., 2022).

In closing, the successful expansion of Islam from the coast to the remote interior of Sumatra is a testament to the flexibility of this teaching to the cultural diversity of the archipelago (Hoesterey, 2022). This transformation transformed Sumatra from a region formerly anchored in local agrarian traditions into a part of a global Islamic community network that continues to respect local values (Amir, 2022). This historical journey ultimately established Sumatra as a key pillar of Islamic civilization, uniting diverse ethnicities within a dynamic religious bond (Afandi, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The spread of Islam on the island of Sumatra demonstrates a highly structured historical relationship, beginning from the globally open coastline and extending into the more isolated interior of Sumatra. This transformation not only transformed the beliefs of the people but also transformed the social, political, and economic order across the island. The success of the spread of Islam depended heavily on the ability of its carriers to utilize maritime trade routes and river networks as communication hubs connecting the various cultural entities in Sumatra.

The main strategy that is the key to the success of expanding Islamic influence from coastal areas to the interior includes several important aspects:

1. Utilization of Geography: The use of large rivers as the main transportation routes for preachers and traders to reach communities in interior areas.
2. Political Power of the Sultanate: The active role of the ruler in providing legitimacy and protection for da'wah activities in new areas.
3. Cultural and Educational Approach: Implementation of persuasive preaching through traditional educational institutions and marriage processes that strengthen family ties between community groups.

In the interior, Islam demonstrates great flexibility through a process of acculturation with local traditions. This is evident in the integration of Islamic values into customary structures, as seen in the Minangkabau community and the social transformation in Batak lands. This acculturation ensures that Islam is not perceived as a threat to indigenous identity, but rather as a complement that enriches local wisdom, thus creating social harmony that has endured for centuries.

In conclusion, Islam's journey from the coast of Sumatra to the interior has become the primary foundation of Islamic civilization in the archipelago. The integration that occurred through trade, politics, and culture united ethnic diversity under a strong religious identity while respecting differences. Understanding this pattern of spread provides valuable perspective on how Islamization proceeded peacefully and sustainably, ultimately shaping the sociocultural landscape of modern Indonesia today

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