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THE HISTORICAL ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ISLAM AND LOCAL RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IN THE NUSANTARA

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to present a historical overview of the spread of Islam in the archipelago and to analyse how Islamic teachings engaged with the indigenous belief systems of local communities. Employing a qualitative method with a descriptive-historical approach, this study explores trade networks, the role of scholarly circles, and culturally rooted da'wah strategies that contributed to shaping the distinct character of Islam Nusantara. The findings reveal that Islam expanded peacefully and progressively through various channels, as reflected in the Arab, Persian, Gujarati, and Chinese theories of Islamisation. Prior to the arrival of Islam, local societies were influenced by animism, dynamism, and Hindu–Buddhist traditions. Sufi scholars and preachers utilised art, language, and communal customs as mediums for spreading Islamic teachings, resulting in forms of acculturation such as selamatan, tahlilan, wayang performances, gamelan traditions, and the Sekaten festival. These acculturative practices did not erase local culture but reformulated it within the framework of Islamic monotheism. Overall, the study demonstrates that the distinctive identity of Islam Nusantara emerged from a harmonious synthesis between Islamic principles and local cultural expressions, producing a model of religiosity that is moderate, inclusive, and culturally adaptive. This characteristic continues to offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary socio-religious challenges in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The entry of Islam into the Archipelago was a gradual historical process that was inseparable from the cultural context that had existed long before its arrival. This archipelagic region had previously been influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist, animistic, and dynamic traditions, meaning that Islam did not arrive in a cultural void (Razaq, 2025). The presence of this new religion subsequently blended with local belief systems through continuous dialogue, social interaction, and adaptation. Therefore, understanding the traces of the encounter between Islam and local traditions becomes crucial to observe how the religious character in the Archipelago was formed as a face of Islam that is moderate, tolerant, and closely aligned with the local community's culture. This underscores the urgency for Indonesia's current condition, especially as society faces the dynamics of cultural and religious plurality that demand an inclusive attitude and the ability to maintain diversity.

Historically, the spread of Islam in the Archipelago since the 13th century occurred through trade networks, the role of Ulama and Sufis, and social relations such as marriage. The maritime route connecting South Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia became the primary medium for the dissemination of Islamic teachings, as Muslim traders brought not only commodities but also religious values. Munawaroh et al., (2025) assert that in subsequent developments, the Ulama and Sufis strengthened the process of Islamization through education, cultural da'wah (preaching), and the formation of Muslim communities in various coastal settlements. It was this approach, which prioritized persuasive rather than coercive methods, that led to Islam's acceptance without causing major conflict with the local cultural structure (Muna, 2020). Various studies indicate that this success was influenced by the strategy of acculturation that harmonized Islamic teachings with local customs, allowing Islamic values to be accepted through media such as art, language, and social practices that were already familiar to the community.

Based on research, the process of interaction between Islam and local traditions gave birth to a number of distinct cultural forms, such as selamatan, tahlilan, kenduri, sekaten, and Islamic-inspired arts like wayang and gamelan. These traditions are concrete examples of how pre-Islamic elements were not erased, but were given new meaning consistent with the teachings of tawhid (monotheism). This phenomenon of syncretization and cultural accommodation created a unique religious character,

where Islam was present as a spiritual force without negating local identity. Furthermore, in several regions, such as Java and Minangkabau, the acculturation process was institutionalized through proverbs, customary symbols, and communal religious practices that affirmed the balance between Islamic teachings and local wisdom. Thus, Islam Nusantara is not only understood as a theological concept, but also as a result of socio-cultural construction that grew out of the historical experience of its people (Tsaqib et al., 2024).

From this encounter, the identity of Islam Nusantara emerged as a model of religiosity that is moderate, contextual, and deeply rooted in local culture (Nurhanisah & Tjoetra, 2025). affirmed by Prihantoro, (2017) Islam Nusantara emphasizes the values of tasamuh (tolerance), tawasuth (taking the middle path), and tawazun (balance), which are crucial pillars in maintaining social harmony amidst a multicultural society. This identity also strengthens the relationship between religion and the state, as the Islamic values presented are capable of dialoguing with the reality of Indonesian nationhood. In the context of globalization, this model of Islam serves as an important reference for addressing issues of extremism, excessive purification, and the tendency to negate local traditions that still persist in community life.

The urgency of re-examining the history of the encounter between Islam and local traditions is becoming increasingly important today. Amidst the rising tide of transnational ideologies and demands for the purification of teachings, historical study can provide a strong foundation for strengthening an understanding of Islam that is inclusive and respects diversity. Such studies also open up space for the preservation of local traditions that are in line with the principles of sharia, while simultaneously enriching the nation's Islamic identity. Other researchers affirm that the integration between Islam and local culture is not only a historical phenomenon but also serves as an effective model of religiosity for maintaining Indonesia's social cohesion Khairudin et al., (2025). This aligns with Umam & nabila, (2025) who state that by examining how Islam interacts with local traditions, we can understand the roots of the diversity in religious practices in Indonesia and strengthen the distinct Nusantara Islamic identity an identity that is based not only on texts but also on local culture. Islam Nusantara is an Islamic paradigm that emphasizes the importance of harmonization between Islamic teachings and local wisdom in Indonesia. This concept was born through a long process of cultural acculturation where Islamic values were aligned with local traditions without sacrificing the core essence of its teachings.

Based on this background, this article aims to analyze the process of interaction between Islam and local religious traditions in the Archipelago, by highlighting the historical pathways of Islamization, the dynamics of acculturation, and the formation of the Islam Nusantara identity as a product of a long dialogue between religion and culture. This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to understanding how Islamic teachings shape and are shaped by local cultural contexts, while simultaneously affirming its relevance to Indonesia's plural and dynamic religious life (Umam & Nabila, 2025). The study of the interaction between Islam and local traditions requires historical, anthropological, theological, and social study approaches, which open up new theoretical and methodological opportunities in religious research in the Archipelago.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-historical approach, which aims to understand past events in depth through the exploration of textual data. This approach was chosen because it is capable of describing the context, process, and historical dynamics related to the research theme in a detailed and sequential manner. According to Amirudin & Supraha, (2025) by utilizing this method, the researcher interprets the meaning from various non-numerical sources such as texts, documents, and historical records, thereby enabling the reconstruction of events chronologically and objectively.

In this research, the data obtained comes from both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data includes ancient scripts, local manuscripts, and traditional archives that provide a direct record of the historical processes under investigation. The secondary data encompasses history books on Islam Nusantara, scientific journals concerning the process of Islamization and cultural acculturation, academic articles, previous research reports, as well as anthropological and sociological studies. The combination of these two types of data provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the phenomena under study accurately and in depth (Safari et al., 2024).

The data collection technique was carried out through library research (studi pustaka), which is a research process focused on the review and analysis of written sources without involving field observation or interviews. Through this technique, the researcher identifies, classifies, and examines various relevant literature, ranging from scientific journals, reference books, historical archives, to related research reports.

This allows the researcher to construct a theoretical framework, map out the perspectives of various experts, and review previous research gaps (kekosongan penelitian), so that the analysis results can be presented comprehensively and argumentatively (Saefullah et al., 2024).

The data analysis in this research comprises four main stages. First, heuristics, which involves collecting all relevant sources, both primary and secondary. Second, source criticism, which is performed through two aspects: external criticism to assess the authenticity and physical validity of the source, and internal criticism to test the consistency of the content and the truthfulness of the information. Third, interpretation, which involves interpreting the meaning, context, and relationship between events. Fourth, historiography, which is realized in the compilation of a systematic, logical, and factual historical narrative as the final form of data reconstruction (Fajarul et al., 2024).

To ensure the validity of the data (keabsahan data), this research applies the technique of source triangulation. Triangulation is carried out by comparing information from various types of sources, such as ancient manuscripts, historical archives, and expert opinions in scientific journals. If a piece of information is found to be consistent across these different sources, the data is considered valid and justifiable. This process helps to enhance the accuracy of the interpretation and strengthens the credibility of the conclusions obtained in the research (Hayati & Hasanah, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

1. The Initial Process of Islam's Entry into the Archipelago

The research findings indicate that the initial process of Islam's entry into the Archipelago took place through international trade routes from the 7th to the 13th centuries CE. Major ports such as Aceh, Malacca, Gresik, Ternate, and the coasts of Kalimantan became meeting points between Muslim traders from Arab, Persia, India, and China and the local communities. This interaction was not only concerned with trade commodities but also brought religious values that were gradually accepted through social relations, trade networks, and developing Muslim communities. The ports became the first centers for the spread of Islam before the teachings moved inland through conversion, inter-cultural marriage, and sustained economic activities. This research also finds that the process of Islamization in the Archipelago can be understood through four main theories:

a) The India Theory

This theory suggests that Islam began to appear in Indonesia in the 13th century CE through the trading activities of Muslim merchants from India. According to this theory, the Gujarat community had established commercial relations with Indonesian territories earlier than the Arabs. This argument is strengthened by archaeological findings in the form of the tomb of the Sultan of Samudera Pasai, dated 1297, which shows the distinctive artistic features of Gujarati tombstones. The main figure who developed this theory was Pijnappel, a Professor of Malay Language at Leiden University, Netherlands. He asserted that the spread of Islam to the Archipelago did not originate directly from the Arabian Peninsula, but rather came through regions in India such as Gujarat and Malabar. A large number of Arabs who were followers of the Shafi'i school of thought (Mazhab Syafi'i) had previously migrated and settled in India. This view was later revised by Snouck Hurgronje. He argued that the Islam that developed in Indonesia mainly originated from the Malabar and Coromandel regions in South India. One of the reasons he put forward was the similarity in religious traditions, particularly the practice of the Shafi'i school, which is still found in the Coromandel area today. This theory concludes that the Islam that entered the Archipelago at the end of the 13th century did not come from Gujarat but was brought by Muslim preachers from the Coromandel coast.

b) The Arab Theory

This theory is a new idea that emerged as a critique of the previous one, the Gujarat theory from India. This view is based on a number of Chinese sources which record that as early as the 7th century, there was an Arab merchant leading a community of Muslim settlers on the west coast of Sumatra. Some Arab merchants entered into marriages with local residents, leading to the formation of early Muslim community groups originating from local converts. Key figures supporting this Mecca theory include J.C. Van Leur, Thomas W. Arnold, and Buya Hamka (Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah). The proponents of this theory assert that the existence of Islamic political authority in the 13th century indicates that the process of Islam's entry into the Archipelago had taken place much earlier, namely since the 7th century CE, with the Arabs playing a major role in its dissemination process. The argument put forward by Buya Hamka is reinforced by the view of Thomas W. Arnold, who showed that Arab merchants

played a dominant role in both trade activities and the spread of Islamic da'wah (preaching) in the Archipelago region.

c) The Gujarat Theory

This theory suggests that the spread of Islam to the Indonesian territory originated from immigrants from Gujarat. This view is supported by a number of Dutch scholars, including Pijnappel and Moquette. Both figures believed that the carriers of Islamic teachings to the Archipelago were Arabs who had long resided in the Gujarat region. Meanwhile, Snouck Hurgronje asserted that trade relations between Indonesia and Gujarat had been established earlier than trade relations with the Arabs. In line with this, G.W.J. Drewes pointed out the conformity of the mazhab (school of thought) adhered to by Muslim communities in Indonesia and Gujarat, which is the Shafi'i school. Moquette further strengthened this argument through a study of tombstones from both regions. He found similarities between the tombstones found in Pasai and the tomb of Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim in Gresik with the tombstones discovered in the Cambay region, Gujarat.

d) The Cina Theory

The China Theory explains that one of the origins of Islam's arrival in Indonesia is linked to the development of Islam in China. Islam began to develop in that region during the Tang Dynasty (618–905 CE). According to historical records, Islam was introduced to China by a Muslim commander named Sa‘ad bin Abi Waqash from Medina during the reign of Caliph Uthman bin Affan. Furthermore, the city of Canton even became a center for the da'wah activities of Muslim scholars and traders from China. This theory assumes that the spread of Islam to the Archipelago occurred along with the migration flow of the Chinese people to the East Asian region. They are estimated to have reached the southern part of Sumatra around the year 879 or in the 9th century CE. Therefore, the contribution of the Chinese community to the Islamization process in Indonesia is considered important to note, as various elements of Chinese culture appear to have fused into a number of local Islamic traditions.

2. Local Belief Conditions Before Islam

The emergence of civilization in the Archipelago cannot be separated from the strong influence of Indian culture. This is evident through the discovery of various inscriptions, such as the inscription of King Mulawarman from the Kutai Kingdom,

which is estimated to originate from the 4th century CE, and the inscription of King Purnawarman from the Tarumanegara Kingdom, which is believed to have existed since the 5th century CE. The arrival of Indian traders to the Archipelago region not only brought changes to the local belief system but also introduced writing. This is proven by the large number of inscriptions, especially Buddhist inscriptions, written in Old Malay using the Pallawa script. This interaction with Indian merchants subsequently triggered the formation of Hindu-Buddhist styled royal institutions in various regions of the Archipelago.

The Hindu-Buddhist influence on the life of the Archipelago's communities is evident in the emergence of a royal system of government that replaced local leadership structures based on villages and tribes. The presence of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms during that era became an important phase in the history of the Archipelago, as it showed that society was capable of accepting foreign cultural elements as part of its civilizational development. Some Hindu-Buddhist styled kingdoms that emerged between the 4th and 7th centuries CE include:

- Kutai Kingdom (Hindu): The Kutai Kingdom is estimated to have been established in the 4th century CE, supported by the existence of the Yupa inscription. The inscription explains the presence of three social layers: the group mastering the Sanskrit language, the warrior class (ksatria), and the indigenous Kutai community who still adhered to ancestral beliefs.
- Tarumanegara Kingdom (Hindu): This kingdom was located in West Java and developed around the 5th century CE. Information about this kingdom is obtained from seven inscriptions in Pallawa script and Sanskrit language. These inscriptions also mention the initial construction of temple complexes during the Tarumanegara period (5th–7th centuries CE). Although the influence of Buddhism only appears in the North Coast of West Java (such as the Batujaya site), politically, the kingdom's rulers preferred Hinduism as the basis for the legitimacy of power.
- Srivijaya Kingdom (Buddhist): Srivijaya was established around the 7th century CE with its administrative center in Palembang. Its level of civilization is considered high, as Srivijaya was a maritime kingdom that served as a center for Buddhist learning as well as a trade hub in the Southeast Asian region. Its strategic location along the Strait of Malacca, coupled with a strong naval fleet

and superior commodities such as camphor, nutmeg, resin, cloves, and sandalwood, made Srivijaya play a major role in international trade networks.

The earliest traces of Hindu influence in the Archipelago are obtained from inscriptions originating from the mid-8th century CE, while evidence of the development of Buddhism is visible in the Srivijaya inscriptions from the 7th century CE. Even Buddhist teachings had been present since the 5th century CE. This indicates that Hinduism and Buddhism entered the Archipelago region during a relatively simultaneous period. The influence of both religions is seen in various archaeological remnants in the form of sacred buildings, statues (arca), inscriptions, literary works, and legal texts. In North Sumatra, for example, the ruins of a rectangular temple known as Candi Jepara from the 9th century CE were found. Meanwhile, in West Kalimantan, the Wisnu Nandi statue, fragments of deities, and rock carvings in the form of two stupas were discovered. Based on these findings, it can be estimated that the communities in these regions adhered to either Hinduism or Buddhism, although the depth of influence of each cannot be fully ascertained.

3. Early Forms of Interaction between Islam and Local Traditions

When Islam began to be accepted, the interaction between Islamic teachings and local culture occurred through a persuasive and dialogical approach. The Ulama and Sufis played a central role in Islamization, primarily through the utilization of local arts such as wayang, gamelan, traditional poetry (syair), and the use of regional languages. Da'wah through art proved effective because the community could accept religious messages without feeling threatened by cultural change. Wayang was processed into a medium for conveying the values of tawhid and Islamic morals, while gamelan music accompanied the gentle and easily accepted da'wah poetry.

This process of interaction gave rise to a distinctive form of cultural acculturation. The rituals of selamatan, tahlilan, kenduri, and the Sekaten celebration are concrete examples of how local traditions were maintained but given a new meaning according to Islamic values. Selamatan, which previously functioned to maintain cosmic balance, is now integrated with the recitation of prayers (doa) and dhikr. Tahlilan became a form of honoring ancestors contextualized with the teachings of tawhid. The Sekaten tradition demonstrates the ability of Islamic da'wah to reach the wider public through a lively and symbolic cultural festival.

Besides the cultural route, Islamization was also strengthened by the international network of Ulama that had been established since the 16th century. Nusantara Ulama were closely connected to the Haramain Ulama network in Makkah and Madinah, forming a chain for the transmission of Shafi'i fiqh, Sunni tasawwuf (Sufism), and scholarly ethics, which were then brought back to the pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Pesantren became educational centers that played an important role in shaping local Ulama, conducting da'wah, and maintaining the continuity of Islamic tradition. The sorogan system, bandongan (group learning), and the teaching of kitab kuning (classic Islamic texts) were effective means for the structured dissemination of religious knowledge.

4. Acculturation in Religious Practices

Acculturation in religious practices among the people of the Archipelago before the arrival of Islam was a process of cultural interaction that occurred gradually and without causing open conflict. During that time, various local groups already had belief systems deeply rooted in animism, dynamism, and ancestor worship. When Islamic teachings began to be introduced, the community's acceptance process was not carried out through drastic changes, but through a subtle stage of adjustment between new values and the already ingrained belief structure. This pattern made the religious transformation more natural, as the community did not feel that their beliefs were being erased, but rather enriched and directed toward a more rational and structured understanding of divinity.

In ritual practices, old elements such as the use of offerings (sesaji), communal ceremonies, or the honoring of ancestral figures were not completely eliminated. These elements were then given new meaning in accordance with Islamic teachings, for example through the replacement of symbolic objects, the reinterpretation of the ritual's purpose, or the adjustment of the ceremony's procedures. In other words, local traditions were not abolished, but rather corrected so as not to contradict the principle of tawhid. This form of adaptation can be seen in the selamatan ceremony, the kenduri tradition, tahlilan, or various religious activities that contain socio-cultural elements, where Islamic values function as a filter and guide for these practices.

Furthermore, figures who spread Islam, such as the Ulama and Dai (preachers), played a central role in this acculturation process. They acted not only as transmitters of doctrine but also as cultural mediators who adapted da'wah strategies to the social conditions of the local community. This flexible cultural approach led to the rapid

acceptance of Islam, as the community was not forced to abandon their local identity. Through this process, the distinct Nusantara religious character was formed, blending Islamic values with local traditional wisdom, resulting in a form of religiosity that is moderate, harmonious, and contextual. This acculturation ultimately built the character of Indonesian Islam, which is not only oriented towards theological aspects but also plays a role in maintaining social cohesion and strengthening community values.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, the encounter between Islam and local religious traditions in the Archipelago is one of the most remarkable historical phenomena in the history of global religious diffusion. Unlike many regions in the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa, or Eastern Europe that underwent phases of political conquest or military expansion, Islamization in the Nusantara occurred with a profoundly peaceful and cultural character. The people of the Archipelago, who had long lived with ancestral traditions, accepted Islam not through coercion, but through a process of re-signifying the symbols and religious practices they observed. Islamic values were introduced through a cultural approach that provided space for the continuity of tradition while simultaneously guiding these practices to be aligned with the teachings of tawhid (monotheism).

This transformation is clearly visible in various ritual activities such as selamatan, tahlilan, and life-cycle ceremonies, where the local socio-cultural structure was maintained, but its spiritual content was adjusted to Islamic values. The Ulama and Islamic preachers played a central role in this process, as they not only conveyed religious teachings but also navigated local traditions so that they could be integrated into the Islamic framework. This success not only demonstrates the flexibility of Islamic teachings in adapting to local wisdom but also showcases the sensitivity of the da'i (preachers) who understood the local community's psychological and social dynamics (Khoiri, 2019.)4-13). The principle of da'wah bil-hikmah (preaching with wisdom) and mau'izhah hasanah (good counsel), as stipulated in the Quran, Surah An-Nahl: 125:

اُدْعُ اِلٰى سَبِيْلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِيْ هِيَ اَحْسَنُۗ اِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ اَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيْلِهٖ وَهُوَ اَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِيْنَ

Meaning: Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel, and argue with them in the most excellent way. Indeed, your

Lord is the one who knows best who has strayed from His way, and He knows best who is rightly guided.

Similarly, the prophetic mission of Rasulullah ﷺ as a bearer of Mercy (Rahmat) is affirmed in (QS. Al-Anbiya: 107):

وَمَآ اَرْسَلْنٰكَ اِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعٰلَمِيْنَ

Meaning: We have not sent you (O Prophet Muhammad) except as a mercy to the worlds.

This verse affirms that Islamic da'wah must reflect gentleness and respect for humanity (Muna, 2020).

The international trade network from the 7th to the 15th centuries played a crucial role in bringing Islam to the Archipelago (Hendraswati & Jamalie, 2015). Muslim traders from Arab, Gujarat, Persia, and the Middle East established strong commercial ties with coastal communities in Aceh, Palembang, Malacca, Gresik, Tuban, and Ternate. These trade relations involved not only the exchange of commodities like pepper, spices, textiles, and metals, but also served as a means for the exchange of moral values. The honesty of Muslim traders became a "living da'wah" that was more powerful than formal sermons. Their work ethic, integrity, and adherence to the halal-haram principle created an image of Islam as a religion that produced people of good character (akhlak). This was the practical da'wah that made local communities feel comfortable and voluntarily interested. This model was also exemplified by Rasulullah ehw ﷺn he traded in the Arabian markets before being appointed as a prophet (Fuad Masykur, 2019).

In addition to trade, the Ulama also engaged in intellectual mobility. They formed scholarly networks between the Haramain (Mecca-Medina), Hadhramaut, Gujarat, Aceh, and Java. Many Nusantara students studied in Yemen, Mecca, and India, and returned bringing works of tasawwuf (Sufism), fiqh (jurisprudence), and tafsir (exegesis). This intellectual network demonstrates that Islamization was not superficial, but occurred through intellectual and spiritual depth. Thus, Islam was accepted not as a foreign religion, but as a way of life originating from a tradition of Ulama with a strong sanad (chain of transmission) (Umam & Nabila, 2025).

Strategy of the Wali Songo: Methodological Innovation and High Cultural Sensitivity. The Wali Songo (Nine Saints) played a major role in the crystallization

stage of Islam in Java. They were not only preachers but also cultural innovators who understood that Javanese society highly valued symbols, aesthetics, and harmony. Therefore, they did not reject local culture but gradually entered into it through the following methods: (Syamsurijal, 2022).

- Modifying religious symbols.
- Utilizing art as a means of da'wah.
- Using local language in religious explanations.
- Integrating tasawwuf values with Javanese ethics.

The Wali Songo used a method of preaching that was subtle and did not demean the local culture. They understood that eradicating a culture that had existed for hundreds of years was an unwise act that could potentially create conflict. Instead, they infused that culture with the meaning of tawhid(Wahdani, 2025).

Transformation of Arts and Traditions as Vehicles for the Dissemination of Islamic Teachings. One of the most unique aspects of Islamization in the Archipelago is the use of art as a medium for da'wah. Art was not merely entertainment but possessed a philosophical depth appreciated by the community. The Wali Songo understood this and made it an effective medium for da'wah. The following table provides a more specific explanation of the arts and traditions used as media for da'wah:

Table 1. Internalization of Islamic Values in Indonesian Traditional Arts

Region	At Form	Internalized Islamic Values	Illustrative Stories / Performances
Java Island	(Shadow Puppet Theatre)	Monotheism (Tawhid), Noble Character (patience, sincerity, justice), Islamic moral ethics	Sunan Kalijaga reinterpreted traditional wayang narratives through Islamic symbolism, such as the character Semar representing wisdom and moral guidance.
Java Island	Tembang, Macapat, and Gamelan	Spiritual awakening, religious counsel, moral reflection	The song “Ilir-Ilir”, widely attributed to Sunan Kalijaga, conveys profound da‘wah messages embedded in poetic and musical expressions.
Aceh	Hikayat, Didong, Rapa’i	Moral teachings, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), monotheism, Sufism, and prophetic history	Religious narratives composed by Acehnese scholars in Malay or Arabic Jawi script, intended for

			broad dissemination within the community.
West Sumatra (Minangkabau)	Saluang, Dendang, Randai	Life guidance, ethical values, and Islamic teachings contextualized within customary traditions	Religious verses performed during traditional ceremonies and Islamic gatherings, blending adat with Islamic moral instruction.
Kalimantan (Banjar)	Madihin	Da‘wah-oriented advice, religious humor, and symbolic moral criticism	A form of spontaneous oral performance accompanied by frame drums, commonly used as a light yet meaningful medium for Islamic preaching.

1. Shadow Puppet Theatre

Shadow Puppet Theatre is a Hindu-Buddhist heritage deeply embedded in Javanese culture. Sunan Kalijaga maintained it because he realized that wayang was a space for the community's spiritual contemplation. However, its old values were processed:

- Old characters were given new interpretations nuanced with tawhid.
- Philosophical plays were changed into stories of the prophets.
- The plot was interspersed with messages of ethics and tasawwuf.
- The performance became an aesthetic da'wah space.

This approach shows that Islam does not have to erase good culture, but rather guides it to align with Islamic values..

2. Gamelan dan Sekaten: Islamic Propagation Embedded in Local Cultural Expressions

Sekaten is a major example of how the Islamic proclamation (syiar) utilized art. Gamelan, the traditional market (pasar rakyat), and the festivities became means to gather the community, and da'wah was then delivered in a pleasant and non-coercive manner. This approach was very effective in introducing the syahadat (testimony of faith) and basic Islamic teachings (Mas’ari & Syamsuatir, 2017).

3. Mosque Architecture That Fosters a Dialogue between Local Culture and the Values of Monotheism

The Demak Mosque, the Menara Kudus Mosque, and other ancient mosques did not imitate Middle Eastern architecture. They retained the form of temples

and shrines, the elements of worship. This approach is a form of intelligent inculturation that preserves the community's identity while maintaining the purity of but removed monotheism. (Soehadha, 2016).

4. Local Traditions as Instruments of Social Civilization and Sources of Collective Education

   Traditions such as thanksgiving, ruwatan, nyadran, kenduri, and agrarian ceremonies were not abolished by Islam, but their orientation was shifted. The primary task of the ulama was to maintain the established social structure so that society would not feel like it was losing its identity. Thus, tradition remained a space of togetherness that bound the community together. (Burga, 2019).

5. Tahlilan as a Revision of Pre-Islamic Death Rituals

   Before the arrival of Islam, Javanese people had a tradition of commemorating the day of death with various forms of spirit worship. (Mas'ari & Syamsuatir, 2017). The saints did not eliminate the structure of the event, but replaced it with dhikr (remembrance of God), prayers, tahlil (recitation of the Koran), and blessings (salawat). The result:

   - Communities remain culturally connected
   - Families feel comforted by prayers
   - The value of monotheism is reinforced without disrupting social traditions.

6. Positive Syncretism: When Culture Becomes a Servant of Tawhid

   The term syncretism is often misunderstood. In the context of the Indonesian archipelago, syncretism does not refer to a blending of beliefs, but rather to cultural adaptation. What occurs is cultural syncretism, that is, maintaining the external form of tradition while modifying its content to reflect Islamic values. For example: (Sunandar & Tomi, 2023).

   - Earth alms → not an offering to the earth god, but an expression of gratitude to Allah
   - Ruwatan → not a magical ceremony, but a prayer for salvation
   - Offerings → replaced with alms for the poor.

Formation of the Islamic Identity of the Archipelago: Harmony between Teachings and Culture The result of the long process of acculturation is the emergence of a unique Islamic identity, namely Islam Nusantara. (Muntoha et al., (2023)) He stated that this

identity was not formed instantly, but through hundreds of years of dialogue between Islamic teachings and local culture. Nusantara Islam is characterized by:

- Moderation in viewing differences
- Respect for culture
- Strengthening solidarity
- Acceptance of plurality
- Balanced religious expression

Islamic boarding school scholars play a crucial role as guardians of this identity. Islamic boarding schools teach Islamic jurisprudence (fikih), Sufism (tasawwuf), morals, and adab (ethics) in a balanced manner. The Sufism taught is not an extreme form of Sufism, but rather an ethical Sufism that emphasizes morality and purification of the heart. This makes piety not merely ritualistic but also social. (Munfaridah, 2017). Moderation as the Foundation of Religiousness in Indonesian Society. Indonesian scholars developed moderation not because of contemporary demands, but because of an awareness that Indonesian society is highly diverse. The moderation they embrace is not a compromise of values, but rather:

- Maintaining a balance between text and context
- Avoiding violence in preaching
- Prioritizing morality in interactions
- Accepting the diversity of cultural expressions.

The concept of Hubbul Wathan Minal Iman is an example of how love for the homeland can be part of Islamic ethics. (Alwi 2021). In the modern era, groups have emerged that completely reject local traditions under the guise of religious purity. However, an approach that completely erases culture can lead to social alienation and community disintegration. Nusantara scholars have asserted that:

- traditions may be maintained as long as they do not conflict with monotheism
- culture is a medium for propaganda, not a threat
- Sharia has flexibility through the concepts of urf, maslahah, and istihsan.

This approach is important as an antidote to radicalism which often ignores the social-community dimension. (Faruq et al., 2024). In a global context, Islam Nusantara is an important reference because it presents a peaceful, culturally friendly face of Islam that can coexist harmoniously with a modern nation-state. Amid rising radicalism and Islamophobia, the Indonesian model demonstrates that Islam can: dialogue with democracy.

- menghargai budaya setempat
- berkontribusi bagi harmoni sosial
- mencegah kekerasan berbasis agama.

Konsep ini semakin dikenal dan diapresiasi di tingkat internasional (Muhammad & Duderija 2025).

Kajian mengenai peran Islam Nusantara sebagai model moderasi beragama menunjukkan bahwa bentuk keislaman di Indonesia berkembang melalui proses historis yang panjang dan dipengaruhi oleh hubungan timbal balik antara ajaran Islam dan tradisi budaya setempat. Nurhanisah & Tjoetra, (2025) menyatakan bahwa Islam Nusantara memiliki posisi penting sebagai kerangka moderasi beragama karena mampu menerjemahkan nilai-nilai universal Islam ke dalam realitas sosial Nusantara. Moderasi dalam konteks ini tidak hanya mencakup sikap toleran, tetapi juga kemampuan berinteraksi secara konstruktif dengan keragaman etnis, budaya, serta tradisi tanpa meninggalkan prinsip pokok ajaran Islam. Pandangan tersebut diperkuat oleh Syamsurijal, (2022), yang menilai bahwa Wali Songo telah meletakkan dasar bagi karakter keberagamaan moderat melalui metode dakwah yang dialogis, adaptif, dan berorientasi pada budaya lokal. Sementara itu, Sholihah et al., (2025) memaparkan bahwa Islam Nusantara merupakan wujud “ijtihad kultural,” yakni upaya ilmiah untuk memadukan ajaran Islam dengan konteks sosial masyarakat sehingga tetap memiliki daya relevansi. Saumantri, (2020) also found that the concept of Islam Nusantara plays a significant role in suppressing the growth of extreme religious ideologies by strengthening the values of tawassuth, tasamuh, and tawazun, which are reflected in people's religious behavior. Overall, these findings demonstrate that Islam Nusantara not only offers an inclusive and moderate religious outlook but also provides an intellectual and cultural foundation for addressing contemporary issues such as radicalism, intolerance, and social division. Thus, Islam Nusantara can be understood as a strong and relevant construct of thought in the discourse of religious moderation, as well as an important contribution from Indonesia to the development of global Islamic civilization.

The findings of this study have important implications for strengthening Islamic discourse in Indonesia, particularly regarding understanding the dynamics of the encounter between Islam and local traditions. The results indicate that the process of Islamization, which occurs culturally, gradually, and without clashing with local culture, can serve as a reference model for strengthening religious moderation in a pluralistic

society. A historical understanding of the acculturation of Islam and local values also opens up space for the development of more adaptive da'wah methods, so that Islamic teachings can be conveyed in a manner relevant to current socio-cultural conditions. Furthermore, this study provides a practical contribution for educational institutions and religious institutions to incorporate elements of local wisdom into the learning process, thereby shaping the character of students who are inclusive, tolerant, and able to appreciate diversity. Therefore, the implications of this research not only play a role in the development of academic studies but also support the creation of a harmonious, dialogical society that is responsive to contemporary challenges.

This study presents a novel contribution, offering an update by highlighting how the historical interaction between Islam and local culture not only produces patterns of acculturation but also influences the formation of contemporary religious practices and provides implications for strengthening religious moderation in multicultural societies. This contrasts with previous research. Syamsurijal, (2022) which emphasizes Islamic moderation through exemplary behavior Wali Songo, as well as studies Sunandar & Tomi, (2023) Studies on syncretism practices in life rituals focus more on phenomenological aspects without providing a comprehensive picture of the dialectical relationship between Islam and local traditions. In addition, research (Alwi, 2021) positioning Islam Nusantara as a concept of religious moderation, but has not yet examined how local traditions function as a medium for the practical internalization of these values. The approach used in this study enriches scholarly discourse by connecting the dynamics of early Islamization with contemporary socio-religious conditions, thus yielding a deeper understanding of the reciprocal relationship between Islamic teachings and local wisdom in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the arrival and development of Islam in the Nusantara are the result of a long, peaceful, and continuous interaction. Islam arrived through various pathways, particularly the maritime trade network, which was later strengthened by the activities of the Ulama, Sufis, and intellectual ties with centers of Islamic scholarship. The Arab, Persian, Gujarat, and China theories show that the Islamization process did not originate from a single path but was an accumulation of influences from various regions. Before Islam arrived, Nusantara society already possessed strong local belief systems and Hindu-Buddhist heritage, necessitating that the spread of Islam be carried out through a culturally friendly and non-confrontational

approach. The utilization of local arts, traditions, and social practices such as wayang, gamelan, poetry, selamatan, and tahlilan became effective means for introducing Islamic values without erasing the cultural identity of the community.

Through this process of integration, a distinctive religious character emerged, known as Islam Nusantara a form of Islam that emphasizes moderation, tolerance, and adaptability to cultural diversity. This character not only harmonizes elements of Islamic teachings with local traditions but is also capable of maintaining social harmony and serving as a relevant model of religiosity in Indonesia's multicultural society. The results of this research affirm that understanding the history of the encounter between Islam and local culture holds significant meaning for strengthening social cohesion, preventing radicalism, and enriching the discourse on developing a peaceful and civilized society.

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