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# Converts and the Early Development of Islam in Sabah: History and Challenges from the 14th Century to the Independence Era in 1963

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**Abstract**

This article discusses Muslim converts (*muallaf)* and the early development of Islam in Sabah, Malaysia, spanning from the 14th century to the attainment of independence in 1963. It examines key factors influencing the Islamization process, including trade, the roles of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates, and the challenges faced during the colonial era. This study is crucial for understanding how Islam took root in Sabah's multicultural society, the role of *muallaf* in spreading Islam, and how this heritage shaped the religious and social identity of the local community. The primary objectives of this study are to analyze the role of maritime trade in introducing Islam to Sabah, to elucidate the contributions of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates in strengthening Islamic influence, to evaluate the role of *muallaf* as agents of *da'wah,* and to assess the challenges and opportunities faced by the Muslim community during the colonial period up to independence. The study employs a qualitative approach using historical analysis, focusing on literature reviews. Data were obtained from academic

journals, books, articles, and reports related to the early development of Islam in Sabah. This approach involves descriptive and thematic analyses to examine patterns and factors influencing the spread of Islam in Sabah. The findings indicate that Islam was introduced to Sabah through Arab and Chinese Muslim traders, further reinforced by the roles of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates, as well as the contributions of local *muallaf* and *ulama*. The challenges posed by British colonial rule, which prioritized Christian missions, were effectively addressed through the resilience of religious institutions, efforts by local *ulama*, and the determination of *muallaf* in upholding their faith and spreading Islamic teachings. This study aims to enrich the understanding of Sabah's Islamic history and serve as a reference for developing more inclusive and effective *da'wah* strategies for multicultural societies.
**Keywords:** Islam in Sabah, Brunei Sultanate, Sulu Sultanate, *Muallaf*, Colonization.

**Inroduction**

Sabah, located in East Malaysia, is **strategically** encircled by the Sulu Sea and the South China Sea, occupying the northern region of Borneo Island. It shares its southern border with Kalimantan, Indonesia, and its southwestern border with Sarawak. With Kota Kinabalu as its dynamic capital and administrative hub, Sabah is strategically positioned as the gateway to Borneo, celebrated for its stunning natural landscapes and rich ethnic diversity (Rusli et al. 2023). **The region's history as a significant hub of cultural and commercial interactions has played a crucial role in shaping its religious landscape, particularly in the spread of Islam.**

The history of Islam's development in Sabah **is both unique and complex**, shaped by the dynamics of trade, diplomatic relations, and the challenges of colonial rule. Before the arrival of Islam, the local communities practiced animistic beliefs, which formed the foundation of their values and traditions (Hajimin et al., 2021). Significant changes began in the 14th century when traders and missionaries from the Nusantara region, including Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao, introduced Islam to Sabah. The vibrant maritime trade along the coastal areas not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also sowed the seeds of Islamic teachings among the local populace (Adam, 2023). **Given these historical developments, studying the early spread of Islam in Sabah is essential to understand how religious transmission occurred and the various factors that influenced its acceptance.**

**This study is particularly significant as it highlights the role of *muallaf* in fostering and sustaining the growth of Islam in Sabah.** *Muallaf* were not passive recipients of Islam; rather, they acted as intermediaries, bridging the Islamic teachings introduced by foreign missionaries with the customs and traditions of the local communities. Islamic values such as justice, brotherhood, and social harmony were contextualized and adapted by the *muallaf*, making Islam more relatable and accessible to the broader society. This process elevated Islam not only as a religion but also as an integral part of Sabah's cultural identity (Rasip, Ramlee, & Ramli, 2024). **Understanding the influence of *muallaf* in this historical process is critical, as their role contributed significantly to the localization and acceptance of Islam in the region.**

Despite their crucial role, *muallaf* and early Islamic missionaries faced significant challenges. The spread of Islam in Sabah was met with resistance, especially during the colonial era, when pressures from colonial powers, particularly the British, significantly hindered its growth. The British administration's support for Christian institutions and

education systems created substantial barriers to the expansion of Islam. Discriminatory policies, restrictive laws, and constraints imposed on Islamic educational institutions further compounded the difficulties faced by the Muslim community, including *muaflaf*. *Muallaf*, in particular, encountered psychological and social challenges in maintaining their faith, often navigating between their new religious identity and their indigenous cultural heritage. **The marginalization of Islam in official policies further exacerbated these struggles, necessitating strong resilience and adaptability among *muallaf* to sustain their faith.**

By analyzing historical sources and examining the contributions of key figures and institutions, this research aims to deepen our understanding of Islam's history in Sabah while providing a foundation for more effective and contextually relevant strategies for contemporary da'wah efforts. **This study is crucial not only for scholars of Islamic studies but also for policymakers, religious leaders, and social researchers interested in understanding religious transformation in pluralistic societies.** Understanding the historical experiences of *muallaf* offers crucial lessons for current and future efforts in Islamic propagation, especially in regions where religious conversion and integration continue to be pertinent issues. By addressing these historical narratives, this research contributes to broader discussions on religious identity, social adaptation, and the resilience of faith communities in diverse cultural landscapes.

*Muallaf* played a crucial role in the initial stages of Islam's development in Sabah. They acted as intermediaries, bridging the Islamic teachings introduced by foreign missionaries with the customs and traditions of the local communities. Islamic values such as justice, brotherhood, and social harmony were contextualized and adapted by the *muallaf,* making Islam more relatable and accessible to the broader society. This process elevated Islam not only as a religion but also as an integral part of Sabah's cultural identity (Rasip, Ramlee, & Ramli, 2024). The early spread of Islam was concentrated in coastal areas that were hubs of trade, serving as primary points of cultural and religious exchange.

However, the development of Islam in Sabah was not without challenges. During the colonial era, pressures from colonial powers, particularly the British, significantly hindered the spread of Islam. The colonizers' support for Christian institutions and education systems created substantial barriers to the growth of Islam. Discriminatory policies, restrictive laws, and constraints imposed on Islamic educational institutions further compounded the difficulties faced by the Muslim community, including *muallaf*. In this environment, *muallaf* often struggled with psychological and social challenges in maintaining their faith.

Despite these obstacles, Islamic missionaries and *muallaf* demonstrated remarkable perseverance. As noted by Sintang (2019), they continued their efforts to ensure the survival of Islam with the support of local communities, laying a strong foundation for the religion's development until Sabah attained independence in 1963. This study explores the pivotal role of *muallaf* in fostering the growth and resilience of Islam in Sabah, especially within a multicultural society. By analyzing historical sources and examining the contributions of key figures and institutions, this research enhances our understanding of Islam's history in Sabah while offering valuable insights for developing more effective and contextually relevant strategies for contemporary da'wah efforts.

**Literature Review**

Islam has been well-received by the people of Sabah and has grown harmoniously through approaches that respect traditional norms and values, which form the core of local culture. Mulyadi, Moh Dede, & Widiawaty (2022) highlight the role of traditional beliefs and local wisdom in shaping Sabah's social system. Their study underscores how the interaction between traditional beliefs and Islamic values has helped maintain cultural balance during the Islamization process in the region. However, in-depth studies on the role of *muallaf* as intermediaries in this process remain underexplored.

Yakin (2017), examines the influence of traditional culture and Islam on the development of customs and death rituals among the Bajau community. Her research illustrates how the acculturation of Bajau culture and Islamic teachings has significantly transformed their traditions, particularly regarding animistic beliefs and rituals that once played a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. Through collective ceremonies such as traditional festivals, values such as mutual respect, collective welfare, and environmental sustainability are preserved. The study emphasizes the importance of the spiritual and social frameworks shaped by these traditions, though there remains a need for deeper analysis of how Islam is embraced by *muallaf* from various ethnic communities in Sabah.

Muhiddin (1990), provides an early overview of the introduction of Islam in Sabah, emphasizing the critical role of Muslim traders from Arabia and China in spreading Islam through trade interactions. The exchange of goods, culture, and beliefs during these interactions gradually introduced Islamic values to local communities, which were then integrated into their daily lives. Additionally, Muslim traders ventured into remote areas to convey Islamic teachings to indigenous communities still practicing traditional beliefs. However, further studies are needed to examine the role of *muallaf* in strengthening the Islamic teachings introduced by these traders.

Yaacob (2021), investigates the Orientalist perspective on Islam in Borneo, emphasizing how prejudiced Orientalist views created significant challenges for Sabah's Muslim community in preserving their religious and cultural identity. His study reveals that British colonial policies, including social and legal restrictions, had a profound impact on the social, psychological, and *da'wah* efforts of Muslims in Sabah. Policies such as prohibiting the migration of Muslims to non-Muslim areas not only limited interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities but also reinforced Christian dominance in strategic regions, hindered *da'wah* activities, and posed challenges for *muallaf* in maintaining their religious identity amidst social and psychological pressures.

Ramli (1988), highlights the vital role of *ulama* in spreading Islam to Sabah's rural areas. He emphasizes how the *ulama* adapted their *da'wah* approaches to local culture and language, playing a key role in attracting indigenous communities to Islam. However, the development of Islam in Sabah during the colonial era faced major challenges, particularly as Christian missions received full support from the British colonial government. Islamic *da'wah* activities, primarily driven by individuals or volunteers without robust financial or infrastructural backing, were largely confined to coastal areas and Muslim-populated regions. Prominent *da'i* such as Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub were perceived as threats to the colonial Christian agenda, leading to his expulsion in 1956.

Aziz (2013), explores the role of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in spreading Islam through education and *da'wah* in Sabah. He highlights the efforts of Tun Datu Mustafa, the founder of USIA, who successfully ensured Islam's recognition as the official religion of Sabah through the state constitution. This study showcases the final stages of Sabah's socio-religious evolution leading up to independence. However, it also notes the lack of focus on the role of *muallaf* in the *da'wah* efforts of institutions like USIA, including their experiences in strengthening Islam within local communities.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach with historical analysis as the primary methodology. Data sources are derived from a literature review, including documents from academic journals, books, and reports discussing the role of trade, the influence of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates, and the impact of British colonization. The study integrates descriptive and thematic analyses to examine patterns in the development of Islam from the 14th century to 1963, focusing on local communities. A triangulation approach is utilized to ensure the accuracy and validity of data, where multiple data sources are compared to obtain a holistic perspective. The scope of this study centers on local communities and the interaction with external forces that shaped the socio-cultural structure in Sabah during the study period.

**Resesarch Objectives**

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the role of trade, particularly the interactions between Muslim traders and local communities, in introducing Islam to Sabah in the 14th century.
2. To elucidate the contributions of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates in strengthening the influence of Islam in Sabah.
3. To evaluate the challenges and opportunities faced by the *muallaf* and the Muslim community in Sabah in expanding Islam during the colonial era up to independence in 1963.

**Research Findings**

*Sabah Before the Influence of Organized Religions*

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the people of Sabah practiced animism as their primary belief system. Animism was understood as a worldview that ascribed a soul or spirit to all elements of nature, whether living, such as plants and animals, or non-living, such as stones and rivers. This belief system shaped how communities interacted with their environment. Natural objects were regarded as possessing special powers or spirits that required respect to avoid harm or misfortune. This respect reflected the community's appreciation for maintaining balance and harmony with nature (Berinai, 2024).

For the indigenous communities of Sabah, animism was not merely a belief system but a comprehensive way of life. It guided their daily interactions with the environment and formed the foundation of many traditions and rituals. For instance, during significant life events such as birth, marriage, and death, rituals involving the spirits of nature were performed. These rituals aimed to seek blessings, protection, or reconciliation with spirits believed to guard specific areas. This belief system fostered values of respect and recognition for all elements of the ecosystem, reinforcing the interdependence between living beings (Mulyadi, Moh Dede & Widiawaty, 2022).

*Rituals and Values in Animism*

Animism provided a spiritual connection with nature, making it a central component in shaping the cultural identity of Sabah's communities. This belief system not only emphasized respect for nature but also integrated ethics and morality into daily life. Rituals were performed to ensure harmony with nature, such as ceremonies before planting crops to guarantee a good harvest or before establishing new settlements to seek permission from the spirits of the land. These practices demonstrated a profound respect for nature and its balance while reinforcing the belief in the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world (Rahman, 2018).

The animistic belief system served as a vital spiritual and social framework, integrating individual and communal practices to strengthen social cohesion and cultural identity. Collective ceremonies, such as traditional festivals and communal celebrations, united communities through shared spiritual needs while fostering solidarity and mutual respect. Rooted in a worldview that emphasized harmony with nature and collective responsibility, animism instilled values of environmental sustainability, ethical living, and communal well-being. This integration of spiritual, ethical, and moral dimensions shaped a unique cultural identity and provided a foundation for social stability in societies untouched by major world religions (Sendera, 2017).

*The Decline of Animism and Its Legacy*

The spread of Islam and Christianity gradually diminished the influence of animism in Sabah, introducing structured religious teachings with new spiritual perspectives that often conflicted with traditional beliefs (Nasir & Hasan, 2018). Nevertheless, elements of animism persist, particularly in remote areas where communities maintain a close relationship with nature. Although less prominent today, these animistic traditions offer valuable insights into Sabah's spiritual heritage. As the foundation of early Sabah society, animism shaped spiritual, moral, and cultural values, instilling a profound respect for nature, strengthening communal ties, and creating a unique cultural identity (Berinai, 2024).

Although Islam and Christianity have significantly transformed Sabah's spiritual landscape, the legacy of animism remains deeply ingrained in local customs, folklore, and beliefs in guardian spirits of nature. These elements are often adapted to align with newer religious teachings, creating a unique synthesis that reflects Sabah's ability to preserve its heritage while embracing modernity. For instance, the *Tadau Kaamatan* festival, once rooted in animistic thanksgiving rituals, is now celebrated by Muslim communities in a syariah-compliant manner, as promoted by the KDMRS Muslim Organization (KDMRS Muslim, 2023). This blending of traditional and religious practices not only preserves the cultural identity of Sabah's communities but also highlights their capacity to harmonize diverse influences, fostering unity and continuity amidst changing times.

*The Role of Muslim Traders and Preachers in Sabah*

Around the 14th century, Islam began to establish a foothold in Sabah through trade networks and missionary efforts led by traders and preachers from the Nusantara region, including Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao. Maritime trade, as the economic lifeline of the region, played a crucial role in introducing Islam to local communities. Alongside goods, Muslim traders disseminated Islamic teachings and values rooted in justice, brotherhood, and respect

for humanity. Their harmonious approach captivated local populations, who were drawn to Islam's emphasis on universal human values and practical guidance for daily life (Rasip, Ramlee & Ramli, 2024).

Beyond trade, Muslim traders also acted as missionaries, introducing the fundamentals of Islam to local communities through friendly and non-coercive methods. Their open dialogues and daily interactions, characterized by patience, fairness, and generosity, set a positive example, earning the respect of local communities. This wise and thoughtful approach to da'wah accelerated the acceptance of Islam among Sabah's population (Sugandi & Romdhoni, 2023).

*Cultural Interaction and Marriage*

One of the most effective ways Islam spread in Sabah was through intermarriage between Muslim traders and local inhabitants (Adam, 2020). These unions not only strengthened social bonds but also became crucial channels for disseminating Islamic values directly within families and communities. Through marriage, Muslim traders acted as agents of change, introducing Islamic teachings, including the concept of *tawhid*, noble character, and basic acts of worship such as prayer. The adoption of an Islamic way of life occurred gradually and without coercion, aligning with the social and cultural evolution of local communities (Sintang, 2019).

The cultural interactions resulting from these marriages also facilitated the integration of local traditions with Islamic principles, creating a unique new identity. Traditional practices, such as wedding customs and local ways of life, were adapted to align with Islamic principles, making Islam more relevant in Sabah's cultural context. Practices such as *zakat* (almsgiving), halal slaughtering, and religious education were gradually incorporated into the social structure. This process enriched local culture while solidifying Islam's position as the foundation of Sabah's socio-religious identity (Sudarman et al., 2021).

According to Jominal (2020), marriage was a major factor influencing conversions to Islam in Sabah. These unions often encouraged non-Muslim individuals to learn about their partner's religion, leading to a deeper appreciation of Islamic values. This process not only reflected a desire to adapt to family life but also highlighted Sabah's culture of religious tolerance and unity. Marriage, therefore, served as a vital method of spreading Islam, bridging cultural and religious differences, and fostering harmony within Sabah's diverse communities.

**The Role of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates in Spreading Islam**

The early development of Islam in Sabah was significantly influenced by the roles of two regional powers: the Brunei Sultanate and the Sulu Sultanate. In the 15th century, Sabah was under the influence of the Brunei Sultanate, a dominant maritime empire in Borneo that had embraced Islam for centuries (Rasip, 2024). Leaders of Brunei acted as role models in practicing Islamic teachings, particularly among the aristocracy and elites of Sabah, who then served as intermediaries in introducing Islam to the general population. The strong political and diplomatic ties between the Brunei Sultanate and Sabah accelerated the Islamization process, particularly along the coastal areas (Sudarman et al., 2021).

The Brunei Sultanate's influence in spreading Islam in Sabah extended beyond political relations, as it also established religious institutions such as mosques and madrasahs. These institutions served as centers for education and religious activities, allowing Islamic teachings to be systematically disseminated to the local population (Mat Kib, 2003). The Brunei Sultanate's wise leadership in managing a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society ensured that Islam was peacefully accepted without disrupting local traditions. Thus, the Brunei Sultanate not only succeeded in spreading Islam in Sabah but also laid a solid foundation for its sustained growth (Adam, 2023).

By the 17th century, the eastern part of Sabah was ceded to the Sulu Sultanate as a token of appreciation for its military assistance to Brunei. This division placed Sabah under the administration of two sultanates, with Brunei governing the western and northern regions and Sulu overseeing the eastern areas (Soomro, 2014). The Sulu Sultanate's influence also contributed to the spread of Islam in eastern Sabah, albeit with differing approaches and emphases.

This division of power played a pivotal role in shaping the history of Islam in Sabah prior to European colonization. While the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates governed distinct territories, they shared a common goal of strengthening Islam's position as the primary religion in their respective regions. The legacy of this division formed the socio-religious structure of Sabah, which remained significant through the colonial period and into independence.

**The Spread of Islam and Assimilation with Local Culture**

Initially, the development of Islam in Sabah was concentrated along the coastal regions, but efforts were also made to spread it to the interior areas. According to Muhiddin (1990), Muslim traders from Arab and Chinese origins played a significant role in spreading Islam through trade, which involved the exchange of goods, cultures, and beliefs. Through these interactions, local communities gradually embraced Islamic values, which were then integrated into their daily lives. Muslim traders and preachers ventured into remote areas, introducing Islamic teachings to interior communities still practicing traditional beliefs. Their inclusive approach, which respected local customs, facilitated acceptance, allowing Islam to become part of the interior communities' lives, albeit in forms adapted to local traditions (Borham et al., 2021).

The presence of Islam brought significant social changes to Sabah's communities. Islamic teachings, which emphasized values such as justice, brotherhood, and balance, helped improve the social structures of local communities (Rasip, Ramlee & Ramli, 2024). These values were introduced through daily interactions, economic activities, and religious celebrations, indirectly strengthening social bonds within the community. For example, the concepts of *zakat* (almsgiving) and *sadaqah* (charity) fostered a spirit of social solidarity, while congregational prayers deepened communal ties. The arrival of Islam not only transformed individual lifestyles but also united communities through shared practices and values that enhanced social stability.

The early development of Islam in Sabah was the result of a combination of factors, including trade, diplomatic relations, and the influence of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates.

Traders and missionaries from the Nusantara region played a pivotal role in introducing Islamic teachings, while the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates contributed through political and social support that solidified Islam's position. The establishment of religious institutions such as mosques and madrasahs by these sultanates became cornerstones for the organized spread of Islam in Sabah (Mat Zin, 2003). Although later colonial powers imposed restrictions on the direct development of Islam, the strong foundation laid through these early interactions enabled Islam to continue growing. Today, Islam remains a vital part of Sabah's cultural and social identity, with its early legacy still evident in the customs, values, and traditions of its people (Rasip, 2024).

**The Arrival of Christian Missionaries in Sabah**

The arrival of Christian missionaries in Sabah during the early 19th century introduced new challenges to the early development of Islam, especially among the indigenous communities. The British colonizers, who viewed Sabah as a strategic location in North Borneo, used the opportunity to combine economic exploitation with the mission of spreading Christianity. At the time, indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun practiced animism, making them prime targets for missionary efforts. The administration of Christian missions, previously centered in Sarawak, was moved to Labuan, marking the beginning of a systematic effort to spread Christianity to local communities (Richard, 1999).

The establishment of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) in 1881 further strengthened Christian missionary efforts. Besides exploiting natural resources such as timber and marine products, the British viewed the spread of Christianity as a tool to introduce Western values to indigenous communities. This mission was guided by the "3G" principles—God, Gold, and Glory—which blended economic development with religious propagation (Kamal & Resad, 2022).

Christian missionaries received full support from the BNBCC in the form of logistics and political protection, enabling them to conduct missions in both coastal and interior regions. One of their main strategies was to establish educational and social service institutions. Missionary schools in Kudat, Sandakan, and Tawau became key centers for spreading Christian teachings and Western values to the younger generation. Additionally, missionary-built hospitals provided much-needed healthcare services, enhancing the missionaries' image as benefactors to local communities (Maria, 2004).

Through education and social services, Christian missionaries not only taught basic skills such as reading and writing but also systematically imparted religious teachings. This approach successfully attracted local communities, who recognized the immediate benefits of education and healthcare services. Furthermore, agricultural training programs and economic development initiatives introduced modern work ethics and values, facilitating the assimilation of Christian teachings among the local population (Muhiddin, 1990).

The Anglican Church was one of the pioneers of this mission, led by Rev. Father Francis Thomas McDouglas, who was appointed Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak in 1855. Subsequently, other denominations, including Roman Catholicism, the Basel Christian Church, and the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), strengthened their presence. Coastal areas like Sandakan

and Kudat served as early administrative centers before the mission expanded into interior regions such as Keningau and Pensiangan (Mat Kib, 2003).

The spread of Christianity into interior areas was further facilitated by modern technology, such as the Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) airplanes. These aircraft were used to transport missionaries to remote locations and deliver food, medicine, and building materials. This use of technology successfully overcame Sabah's geographical barriers, strengthening connections between interior communities and Christian missionaries (Yusoff, 1994).

**The Impact of Christianity on Sabah's Communities**

The spread of Christianity in Sabah significantly transformed the social and cultural structure of local communities, particularly through the development of educational institutions and social services. Within four decades, the number of Christian schools grew rapidly, starting with 27 schools in 1940 and increasing to 121 schools by 1963. The education provided by Christian missionaries not only improved the literacy rates of local communities but also introduced them to Christian values and Western culture. These schools became key centers for spreading Christianity while producing a more educated and competitive generation. Graduates of missionary schools often became agents of change within their communities, bringing modern values learned from Christian education (Yusoff, 2004).

Christian churches in Sabah also played a crucial role as community hubs, offering various social services. Churches such as St. James Anglican Church in Kudat and St. Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society in Sandakan became important institutions for strengthening social and religious ties within local communities. In addition to hosting religious gatherings, these churches organized educational programs, humanitarian aid, and community services, contributing to social development. These programs strengthened relationships among Christian adherents and expanded the influence of the religion among local populations (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

Beyond education and healthcare, Christian missionaries organized various community activities such as welfare programs and vocational training. These activities further solidified the bond between missionaries and local communities, making churches integral to Sabah's social life. International missionary organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, Basel Christian Church, and SIB collaborated to ensure a systematic spread of Christianity, supported by financial and logistical aid from global organizations. As a result, they successfully established schools, churches, and clinics throughout Sabah, leveraging the support of the British colonizers (Muhiddin, 1990).

The spread of Christianity in Sabah was a systematic effort that combined education, social services, and modern technology. This approach successfully attracted local communities and brought significant changes to Sabah's social structure. Today, the impact of Christian missionary work can still be seen in the form of churches, schools, and social institutions that remain an integral part of Sabah's cultural identity. Although Islam remains the dominant religion in Sabah, the presence of Christianity has contributed to the state's socio-religious diversity, making it one of Malaysia's most unique regions in terms of religious composition (Maria, 2004).

**The Development of Islam in Sabah During the Colonial Era**

During the colonial era, the development of Islam in Sabah faced numerous challenges that hindered its spread, particularly when compared to the Christian missions, which were fully supported by the British colonial administration. Islamic missionary activities were predominantly driven by individuals or volunteer groups that lacked financial resources, infrastructure, and strong formal organizations. This reliance on personal efforts limited the spread of Islam to coastal and interior areas that already had established Muslim populations. At the same time, the British colonizers prioritized the development of Christian missions, which indirectly slowed the process of Islamic propagation in Sabah (Ramli, 1988).

The religious demographic changes in Sabah from 1921 to 1960 illustrate these challenges. The table below highlights the shifts in the religious composition of Sabah's population during the colonial period and the early years of independence. To gain a deeper understanding of the development of Islam in Sabah, an analysis of population demographics is essential.

| No | Religion | 1921 | 1931 | 1951 | 1960 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Islam | 81886 (32%) | 86713 (32%) | 115126 (37%) | 17324 (38%) |
| 2 | Christianity | 6980 (3%) | 10454 (4%) | 29092 (9%) | 75247 (17%) |
| 3 | Buddhism, Hinduism, Others | 33513 (13%) | 41463 (15%) | 33513 (11%) | 206740 (46%) |
| 4 | No Religion/ Unknown | 135426 (53%) | 131593 (49%) | 135425 (43%) | |
| | Total | 257804 (100% | 270223 (100%) | 313156 (100%) | 454311 (100%) |

Source: North Borneo Census & Malaysia Population and Housing Census

These statistics indicate that Islam remained the dominant religion, but the rapid increase in Christian adherents demonstrates the impact of Christian missionary strategies, which were fully supported by the colonial administration (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020).

The British colonizers also imposed restrictions on Islamic missionaries, perceiving them as a threat to the dominance of Christian missions. In 1956, Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub, an active Islamic preacher, was expelled from Sabah due to his perceived challenge to Christian influence. Imam Suhaili, who had actively preached in areas like Putatan, Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu), Keningau, and Tenom, gained significant attention from local communities, including *muallaf* to Islam. Such successful Islamic missionary activities were often seen as direct challenges to the colonial Christian agenda, resulting in drastic actions like his expulsion (Ramli, 1988).

In addition to expelling preachers, the British colonial administration introduced laws to restrict the movement of Muslims. For instance, on April 15, 1935, the North Borneo Legislative Council passed the "Concentration of Mohammedan Community" policy, which prohibited the migration of Muslims into non-Muslim areas. This policy not only limited interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities but also reinforced Christian

dominance in strategic areas (Yaacob, 2021). It also hindered efforts to reach non-Muslims who might have embraced Islam.

Despite these pressures, Islamic preachers in Sabah remained steadfast in spreading Islamic teachings, particularly among *muallaf*, who became evidence of the effectiveness of their mission. *Muallaf* often played a critical role in expanding Islam within their own communities, even in the face of significant challenges.

**Challenges in Islamic Propagation**

In contrast to Christianity, which received full support from the colonizers, the spread of Islam in Sabah faced numerous obstacles. The British provided infrastructure, financial assistance, and protection to Christian missionaries, while Islamic propagation was often restricted through formal limitations. For example, the development of Christian educational institutions flourished under colonial support, whereas Islamic education remained limited and neglected. According to Aziz (2013), by 1970, there were only 68 Islamic schools in all of Sabah, a figure significantly lower than the number of Christian schools funded by the colonial government.

The colonizers' prioritization of Christian missions clearly reflected the imbalance in opportunities for religious institutional development. Colonial policies were not only aimed at spreading Christianity but also served as tools for strengthening the cultural and political influence of the British in Sabah. Simultaneously, policies such as the "Concentration of Mohammedan Community," referenced by Whitehead (1893), reduced the ability of Islamic propagation to reach non-Muslim areas.

As a result of these policies, the number of Christians increased at a much faster rate than Muslims during the colonial era. However, Islamic missionaries continued their efforts to ensure the continuity of Islamic teachings, despite the limited resources available. Their resilience not only safeguarded the Islamic identity of Sabah but also laid a strong foundation for the broader development of Islam in the post-colonial era.

**Social and Psychological Impact of Restrictions**

The restrictions imposed by the British colonizers had profound social and psychological effects on the development of Islam in Sabah. Legislation that forced Muslim communities to remain segregated from non-Muslim societies limited cultural interaction, thereby reducing opportunities to spread Islam to other communities. Muslims also faced social constraints, with minimal access to education or infrastructure support, which was readily provided to Christianity (Yaacob, 2021).

Despite these significant challenges, dedicated Islamic missionaries and individuals persevered in spreading Islamic teachings. They educated existing Muslim communities through informal religious classes and voluntary activities. These persistent efforts helped maintain the presence of Islam in Sabah and supported the growth of Muslim communities. Although progress was slow, Islam remained the dominant religion in Sabah. The limited number of Islamic educational institutions also reflected the imbalance in religious development in Sabah. However, despite their small numbers, these institutions served as vital centers for educating young Muslims and preserving Islamic traditions. This resilience

demonstrated the determination of Sabah's Muslims to uphold their religious identity, even under strong colonial pressures that favored Christian influence.

**Conclusion**

The early development of Islam in Sabah, from the 14th century to independence in 1963, reflects a long and dynamic process influenced by various factors, including trade, local leadership, and geopolitical influence. Islam was introduced through Arab and Chinese Muslim traders who established coastal areas such as Kudat, Sandakan, and Tawau as centers of cultural and religious interaction. Local communities gradually embraced Islam, particularly through intermarriage and the integration of Islamic values into their social structures.

The presence of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates also played a significant role in accelerating the spread of Islam, especially along the eastern coasts of Sabah. Through diplomatic ties and political influence, the Sultans ensured that Islam was adopted as a way of life, particularly among the Bajau and Suluk communities. Although the influence of these Sultanates waned due to Western colonization, Islam remained a foundational element of life, marking the success of its early dissemination.

The British colonial administration, however, played a major role in supporting the development of Christianity in Sabah. Through logistical assistance, political protection, and infrastructure development, they provided full support to Christian missionaries. Comprehensive strategies, including education, social services, and the use of modern technology, successfully attracted local communities to Christianity, leading to a significant increase in its followers.

In contrast, the development of Islam in Sabah faced substantial challenges under British colonial rule. Islamic preachers, such as Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub, were expelled, and policies like the "Concentration of Mohammedan Community" were introduced to restrict the movement and interaction of Muslims. Despite these restrictions and pressures, Islamic missionaries continued their efforts through the establishment of *madrasahs* and religious schools. The steadfastness of the Muslim community in preserving and spreading Islamic teachings remained strong, even though the development of Islam progressed at a slower pace.

By the time of independence, Islam remained the dominant religion in Sabah, despite facing fierce competition from Christianity, which had full colonial support. This achievement is a testament to the resilience and determination of Sabah's Muslim community in overcoming challenges and ensuring that Islam continues to be an integral part of the local identity.

**Future Research**

Recommendations for future research include examining the development of Islam in Sabah after independence, leading to its declaration as the State Religion under the Sabah State Constitution, particularly in the context of socio-political changes and the role of religious institutions. This research is essential to understand the continuity of *da'wah* efforts, the challenges faced, and the impact of government policies on the progression of Islam in Sabah. By exploring aspects such as religious education, community acceptance, and the development of the Muslim community, this study could complement the discussions in this

article and provide a holistic perspective on the growth of Islam in Sabah during the post-independence era.

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