

The Islamization in the Malay Archipelago: a Study of Azyumardi Azra's Thought

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Abstract Indonesia, with over 231 million Muslim people, is home to the world's largest Muslim population. However, the origins of Islam in Indonesia and the process of Islamization in the Archipelago are still highly debated topics among historians. Azyumardi Azra, a distinguished historian, and former UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta rector, has extensively researched Islamization in the Archipelago. This journal serves the purpose of delving into Azra's scholarly perspective, offering insights and analysis on the intricate process of Islamization within Indonesia. The present study adopts a literature review approach to comprehend and analyze Azra's writings. Azra postulates that the Islamic connections with the Archipelago can be traced back to Arab countries via trade routes, which were notably influenced by the triumphant spread of Islam into Persia and the Indian Subcontinent during the Umayyad dynasty (660-749H). In conclusion, Azra held a firm perspective regarding the significant Arab influence during the initial phases of Islamization in the Archipelago.

Keywords: Indonesia, Islamization, Azyumardi Azra, Archipelago, Muslim population.

Abstrak Indonesia memiliki populasi Muslim terbesar di dunia, dengan lebih dari 231 juta orang Muslim. Namun, awal mula Islam di Indonesia dan proses Islamisasi di kepulauan tersebut masih menjadi topik yang sangat diperdebatkan di kalangan sejarawan. Azyumardi Azra, seorang sejarawan terkenal dan mantan rektor UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, telah menulis secara ekstensif mengenai topik ini. Jurnal ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi perspektif Azra tentang proses Islamisasi di Kepulauan tersebut. Metode studi literatur digunakan untuk memahami dan menganalisis tulisan Azra. Azra percaya bahwa hubungan Islam dengan Kepulauan dimulai dari negara-negara Arab melalui jalur perdagangan yang dimotivasi oleh ekspansi Islam yang sukses ke Persia dan Sub Benua India selama dinasti Umayyah (660-749H). Kesimpulannya, Azra memiliki pendapat kuat tentang pengaruh Arab pada tahap awal Islamisasi di Kepulauan tersebut.

Kata kunci: Indonesia, Islamisasi, Azyumardi Azra, kepulauan, populasi Muslim.



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INTRODUCTION

Considering that Indonesia constitutes a significant part of the Malay Archipelago and boasts the largest Muslim population worldwide, comprising 231 million individuals, the examination of Islamization in this region becomes paramount. This necessitates investigating the intricacies of how, when, and by whom this historical transformation occurred. However, until now, the process of debating these questions remains a gray area for historians (Husda, 2016, p. 17).

Furthermore, Islamization in the Malay Archipelago can be deemed a "mysterious" and momentous phenomenon in the history of Islam in Indonesia (Nasikin et al., 2023, p. 58). Therefore, researching how, when, and by whom Islam entered or was brought to the Malay Archipelago is crucial, as it can offer clarity to historians seeking answers to these questions. Furthermore, this historical inquiry holds strategic significance in shaping the character and civilization of a distinguished nation (Hasan, 2012, p. 87).

In this regard, the author will explore how the process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago is perceived from the perspective of Azyumardi Azra, a highly accomplished historian, academic, and Muslim intellectual (Noor, 2018, p. 19). His appointment as the Head (Rector) of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta serves as evidence or validation of Azyumardi Azra's intellect. He effectively brought about changes by transforming IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta into UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, thereby integrating Islamic education into two main streams of education (Islamic and General).

In the discourse on Islamization in the Malay Archipelago, scholars have put forth four primary theories, namely the Gujarat, Arab, Persian, and Chinese theories (Husda, 2016, p. 18). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that other sources present an alternative proposition, positing that Islam's roots in the archipelago can be traced back to the Bengal region (Bangladesh) (Baiti & Razzaq, 2014, p. 140). Nevertheless, it is essential to note that this particular theory enjoys a different level of popularity than the four primary theories previously discussed by the author. Azyumardi Azra, however, posits that Islam's entry into the Malay Archipelago was not a simultaneous event from a singular location nor solely the result of the efforts of a specific group (Nasikin et al., 2023, p. 59). Azra said Islamization began in the late 12th century CE (Azra, 2015, p. 87).

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive reference on the unfolding of the process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago for historians and history enthusiasts. It seeks to facilitate a deeper understanding of the nature of Islamization in the region, offering both a general perspective and insights from the viewpoint of a highly credible historian, Azyumardi Azra.

METHOD

The methodology adopted by the author for this study is qualitative research, focusing on conducting a comprehensive literature review. This process involves meticulously examining and analyzing diverse books, academic journals, and scholarly publications about the research theme. Furthermore, supplementary data is sourced from online and print materials to complement the review and enhance the study's validity. Using the literature review technique, the researcher can amass secondary data by examining existing scholarly works about the theory of Islam's arrival and the process of Islamization in the archipelago. Moreover, the author employs data triangulation as a methodological approach to scrutinize and analyze the gathered information.

The sources include Azyumardi Azra's direct writings, books, articles, and journals. The credibility of these writings does not require questioning, as they directly originate from or are authored by Azyumardi Azra himself. The present study seeks to acquire pertinent information from the papers of Azyumardi Azra, with a specific emphasis on his perspectives concerning the occurrence of the Islamization process in the Malay Archipelago. This investigation aims to explore the aspects of how, when, and by whom this process took place. As such, the findings derived from an in-depth analysis of these sources are expected to significantly contribute to addressing the fundamental research questions posed in this academic journal.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The General Theory of Islamization

Gujarati Theory

The theory of Islamization, according to the Gujarat version, is founded on the ideas of Snouck Hurgronje, a Dutch scholar with a specific interest in Islam from a socio-anthropological perspective (Dalimunthe, 2016, p. 117). In his works, Snouck Hurgronje, who held a doctoral degree, emphasized three fundamental aspects of the Gujarat version of the Islamization theory, such as "*L'Arabie et les Indes Neerlandaises*" and "*Revue de l'histoire des Religions*" (Hendriani, 2020, p. 57). Firstly, he argued that a lack of evidence supports the notion that Islam originated solely from Arabia. Secondly, he highlighted the long-established trade relationship between Indonesia and India. Lastly, Snouck underscored the significance of this theory based on the discovery of the oldest inscriptions in Sumatra. These inscriptions depict the historical connections between Sumatra and Gujarat.

The findings of W. F. Stutterheim, a notable Dutch archaeologist and historian, corroborate this perspective. He posited that Islam's transmission occurred from Gujarat around the 13th century. Stutterheim provided additional support for this claim by referencing the tombstones of prominent rulers from the Samudera Pasai kingdom, with specific emphasis on the grave of Malik-Al Saleh, whose passing occurred in 1270 (Permatasari & Hudaidah, 2021, p. 4).

Arabic Theory

The Arab theory stands prominent among various hypotheses, and it is noteworthy that a substantial number of Westerners automatically associate Muslims with Arabs, assuming a shared Arab origin (Choi, 1996, p. 1). Nevertheless, the process of Islamization in the Nusantara region gains validation through the support of numerous esteemed historians and scholars, such as Buya Hamka, Krawfurl, Keijzer, Nieman, de Hollender, J.C. Van Leur, Thomas W. Arnold, and Al-Attas (F. Nasution, 2020, p. 32). Their collective scholarly acknowledgment adds significant weight to the credibility of the Islamization process in the Nusantara region.

According to this theory, Arab traders actively disseminated Islam in the Nusantara region through the West-East trade route. This assertion finds support in Chinese records indicating early physical interactions between Islam and Sumatra, dating back to the 7th century AD, as Arab Muslim settlements were already established along the western coast of Sumatra (Husda, 2016, p. 20). Furthermore, an additional argument in favor of the Arab theory is the presence of shared religious practices, notably the widespread adoption of the Shafi'i school of thought, observed among the majority of Muslims in the Nusantara region, akin to Muslims in Arab areas like Egypt (Amin & Ananda, 2018, p. 18).

Moreover, the Arab-Islamization theory finds support from various Western historians and garners acknowledgment from Muslim scholars and historians in the Nusantara region and Indonesia. They argue that Islam originated directly from Arabia and was introduced by Arab traders (Rahmadi, 2020, p. 264). This theory is supported by Crawford, a philologist and one of the founding figures of Singapore alongside Stamford Raffles (Abidin & Farida, 2022, p. 43). However, Crawford also acknowledges the role of India in the Islamization process in the Nusantara.

An additional perspective that bolsters the Arab theory posits that Arab Muslims are bound by a religious obligation to propagate and disseminate Islam (Rosele & Rahim, 2015, p. 4). Consequently, one can reasonably infer that attributing the origin of Islamization in the Nusantara region to Arabs is well-founded, as Arab Muslims are guided by their duty and responsibility to engage in the dissemination of their faith (Dawah). This aligns with the notion that the historical process of Islamization in the Nusantara region was facilitated, in part, by the concerted efforts of Arab Muslims driven by their religious convictions.

Buya Hamka, an Indonesian Muslim scholar who received an honorary Doctorate from Al-Azhar University (Hidayati, 2018, p. 29), contends that Islam in the Nusantara region originated from Arabia. He supports this claim by highlighting the similarities in religious schools of thought (Mazhab) adopted by Muslims in the Nusantara and Muslims in Arab regions, especially in Mecca. He further emphasizes that his opinion is bolstered by the Shafi'i school of thought holding a particular position in Mecca (Binarto, 2020, p. 293).

Persian Theory

The groundwork for this theory was established by P.A Hoesein Djajadiningrat. As a Professor and former member of the Raad van Indie (Council of Advisors) during the Dutch colonial period (Said, 2016, p. 115), Hoesein contends that the introduction of Islam to the Nusantara region presents distinctions from other prevailing theories, such as the Gujarat and Arab hypotheses. Nevertheless, the approach shares similarities with the Gujarat perspective, particularly concerning the shared adherence to the Shafi'i school of thought. The Persian course emphasizes the cultural aspects prevalent among Indonesian Muslims, which are perceived to be similar to Persia (Hakim, 2018, p. 10).

Hoesein also highlights three key points of this theory. Firstly, the tradition of commemorating the 10th of Muharram or "Asura Night" in Shia Islam, which the people of the Nusantara region also practice. Secondly, Hoesein emphasizes that Indonesian Islamic mysticism (tasawuf) incorporates the doctrine of merging Kawula Gusti of Sheikh Siti Jenar and/or the concept of *waḥdah al-wujūd* of Hamzah al-Fansūrī. These mystical beliefs bear the influence of Persian Sufism and are intertwined with the teachings of *waḥdah al-wujūd* al-Hallajūd from Persian traditions (A. G. J. Nasution et al., 2023, p. 81). The proposition that the process of Islamization in the Nusantara region originated from Persia gains further substantiation from historical records indicating that the Persian people engaged in physical interactions with the inhabitants of the Nusantara region through the East-West trade routes, dating back as early as the 5th century AD (Almascaty, 2013).

Other sources assert that Persian words have been assimilated into Indonesian or regional languages. For instance, the Sundanese people employ the term "Abdas," derived from the Persian word "Wudu," signifying ablution (Syafrizal, 2015, p. 239). This further bolsters the connection or correlation between the Muslims of the Nusantara region and Persia. In conjunction with Hoesein Djajadiningrat, Umar Amin Husein advocates this theory and highlights the cultural and traditional similarities inherited from Persia pertain to the Nusantara region (Ulya, 2022, p. 445). Umar posits that the Pegon script in Java traces its origins back to Persia (Ningsih, 2021, p. 215).

The Tabut celebration, a traditional ceremony practiced annually from the 1st to the 10th of Muharram by the inhabitants of Bengkulu (Sepiolita et al., 2017, p. 3), serves as a manifestation of the socio-cultural affinities shared between Islam in the Nusantara region and Persia. This correlation is emphasized by Hoesein Djajadiningrat, who utilizes the Tabut celebration as a fundamental element in support of the Persian theory (Ghofur, 2011, p. 162).

Chinese Theory

The trade relations between the Nusantara region and China can be traced back to a period preceding the advent of Islam in the Arab lands, thus establishing the fundamental premise

of this theory. It can be inferred that the Nusantara region has maintained enduring physical interactions with the Chinese populace.

Meanwhile, the history of Islam in China is well-documented to have originated during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), characterized by the growing presence of Arab and Persian traders in Chinese ports (Wekke & Rusdan, 2017, p. 144). This attests to the fact that the Chinese population has been cognizant of, or at the very least had direct interactions with, Muslims since the 7th century CE.

Indeed, the Chinese Annals of the Tang Dynasty (618-960) specifically document the presence of Muslim settlements in Canton, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and other southern coastal regions of China. This historical evidence indicates that Islam had entered and disseminated throughout the Chinese peninsula (Al Qurtuby, 2012, p. 70).

H.J. de Graaf discusses multiple classical Javanese literary works that shed light on the Chinese community's contribution to Islam's advancement in Indonesia. These literary works specifically mention prominent figures like Sunan Ampel (Raden Rahmat/Bong Swi Hoo) and the ruler of Demak (Raden Fatah/Jin Bun) as individuals of Chinese lineage (Husda, 2016, p. 22).

The theory of Islamization originating from China receives additional support through the arrival of Chinese Muslims in Java, particularly in the Demak region, where Raden Patah, who had Chinese ancestry, played a prominent role. Another historical testament lies in the presence of scholars believed to be of Chinese descent, like Gus Dur, and the widely recognized account of Admiral Cheng Ho (Saumantri, 2022, pp. 58–59).

Drawing upon the historical evidence of Islam's proliferation in the Chinese mainland dating back to the 7th century CE (Syafriзал, 2015, p. 293) and taking into account the existence of early Islamic preachers in Indonesia, as discussed earlier, it can be inferred that there is a compelling likelihood that Islam in the Nusantara region indeed originated from China.

The theory of Islamization originating from China is additionally advocated by historian Selamat Muljana, who asserts that the sultans of the Demak Kingdom were of Chinese lineage. He further expounds that the "Wali Sanga" (Nine Saints) also had Chinese ancestry. Selamat Muljana's perspective is grounded in a chronicle discovered at the Sam Po Kong temple, which served as the former residence and landing site of the Chinese Muslim Admiral Zheng He/Cheng Ho, commonly known as Sam Poo (Lutfiyani & Fadlan, 2019, p. 170).

Islamization in the Thought of Azyumardi Azra

Azyumardi Azra underscores the importance of examining the process of Islamization in Nusantara, as he contends that Islam inherently fosters the advancement of knowledge (Azra, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, Azra emphasizes that within the context of Islam's arrival in Nusantara, an enduring discourse and scholarly deliberation persist among historians concerning three

pivotal aspects: the genesis of Islam, the agents responsible for its dissemination, and the chronological framework of its advent in Nusantara (Azra, 2018a, p. 2).

Azra further observes that even today, the discussions and debates among historians concerning Islamization and the inquiries above still need to reach definitive conclusions. This state of affairs is not solely attributable to data limitations and the biased nature of prevailing theories but also stems from certain ideas that tend to prioritize specific facets of the three fundamental issues or inquiries concerning the origin, chronology, and geographical context of Islam's emergence, often at the expense of disregarding other significant aspects (Azra, 2018a, p. 2).

Azra highlights that as individuals develop a stronger affiliation with Islam, it is only natural for inquiries about the religion itself to arise. This phenomenon also elucidates why Muslim and non-Muslim historians actively participate in discussions and debates concerning Islamization in Nusantara (Azra, 2018b, p. 641).

Despite the emergence of higher Islamic education in the 1950s, which saw further growth with the establishment of IAIN in the 1960s (Azra, 2017, p. 125), questions regarding the process of Islamization had already been the subject of historical debate long before that. This underscores the significance of engaging with the ongoing discussions and debates among historians concerning the process of Islamization (Azra, 2017, p. 125).

Based on careful analysis, Azyumardi Azra identifies four key themes that emerge from the debates on the process of Islamization. According to Azra, firstly, Islam was directly brought from Arabia. Secondly, Islam was introduced by "professional" teachers and poets, whereby "professional" denotes individuals who had a deliberate intention to propagate Islam. Thirdly, it is notable that the initial converts to Islam in the Nusantara region were the rulers themselves. According to Azra, most religious propagators, called "professionals," arrived in Nusantara during the 12th and 13th centuries CE (Azra, 2018a, p. 12).

Azra asserts that these four key themes are more than speculative viewpoints lacking substantial evidence. He acknowledges that most Western historians believe that the initial proponents of Islam in the Nusantara were traders. However, Azra presents a contrasting argument, suggesting that this theory, widely embraced by many Western historians, overly accentuates economic motivations and the role of traders (Azra, 2018a, p. 13).

Azra poses thought-provoking questions: "If it is indeed true that traders were the agents responsible for the dissemination of Islam, how substantial was their influence? What was the extent of Islam's propagation through their preaching, and how many individuals embraced Islam due to their endeavors?" He raises this question because he concurs with Hujah Johns, who finds it challenging to accept that traders played a role in disseminating Islam during the Islamization process in the Nusantara (Azra, 2018a, p. 13).

However, on the other hand, Azra also acknowledges that it might be true that Islam was introduced or had a presence in the Nusantara from the early Islamic centuries. Nevertheless, he argues that Islam had only a temporary company during that period, as its influence in the Nusantara became more evident only in the 12th century. Azra further reasons for the significance of questioning why Islam did not possess a tangible presence before the 12th century, despite the substantial involvement of traders in spreading the religion. This consideration arises from their early arrival in the Nusantara region during the 7th and 8th centuries CE (Azra, 2018a, p. 12).

In other words, Azra argues that despite Muslim traders having interacted with the local population since the 7th or 8th century CE, there is no clear evidence regarding a significant presence of local Muslim inhabitants or substantial Islamization in the Nusantara region (Azra, 2018a, p. 14).

Azra contends that Arab traders played a role in disseminating Islam during their dominance of the East-West trade in the 7th and 8th centuries CE. However, the extent of their missionary endeavors might not have been substantial enough to establish extensive Islamic communities in the Nusantara (Amin & Ananda, 2018, p. 83). This aligns with Azra's argument that Islam arrived in a complex manner in the Nusantara, implying that it did not have a specific place of origin or a single group responsible for its introduction and did not co-occur (F. Nasution, 2020, p. 27). Azra acknowledges that Islam did not arrive all at once, indicating that Islam indeed had a presence in the Nusantara from the early Islamic centuries. Still, its influence became more prominent and significant in the 12th century CE.

Azra also critiques the Gujarat Islamization theory. Although he acknowledges that the idea is founded on the resemblance of Islamic tombstones discovered in the Nusantara to those originating from Gujarat (Nasikin et al., 2023, p. 63), he aligns with historian Morrison's perspective that the origin of these tombstones from Gujarat does not inherently suggest that Islam itself originated from that particular region. Azra emphasizes the shortcomings of the Gujarat theory, exemplified by the divergence of religious schools practiced by the Muslim communities in the Nusantara (Shafi'i) as opposed to Islam in Gujarat or Bengal (Hanafi) (Azra, 2018a, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

At least four primary theories are extensively discussed among historians and experts regarding the Islamization process in the Nusantara: Gujarat (India), Arab, Persia, and China. However, Azra believes the Arab theory is the most comprehensive and plausible. Azra describes the arrival of Islam as complex, without a specific place of origin or a singular group responsible, and not co-occurring.

Azra presents four key arguments regarding Islamization in an English academic style: Firstly, he highlights that Islam originated in Arabia. Secondly, he posits that Islam was disseminated by teachers or poets whom he categorizes as "Professionals." Thirdly, he states that the ruling elites in the Nusantara were among the earliest to adopt Islam. Lastly, Azra asserts that most Islamic propagators arrived in the Nusantara between the 12th and 13th centuries CE.

Azra further critiques the Gujarat theory, deeming it to possess several weaknesses, including an overemphasis on one aspect while disregarding other significant elements. Azra concurs with other historians, such as Morrison, who assert that Muslim tombstones from Gujarat during the initial phases of Islamization do not inherently signify that Islam originated from Gujarat. Additionally, the divergence of religious schools between the Muslims in Nusantara and Gujarat emerges as a pivotal factor that warrants scrutiny if Islam originated from Gujarat.

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