

# The Early of Islam in Indonesia

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Abstract; there are many debates among Islamic scholars the exact date and people who bring Islam to Indonesia. This debate happened because there is no valid data to reconstruct the date of coming of Islam. On other side, the meaning of "Islam" differs between one scholar and others, for example; some scholars define it in formal definition as a person who converted Islam. Meanwhile, some of them defined it in sociology term as Islam community or society. There are four opinions about the people who came to introduce Islam to Indonesia. One of them assumed that Islam was brought by India people, the second one from Arab, the third one from Persia, and the last one who thought that Islam came from China.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, Islam, and early of Islam.

## Introduction

Indonesia is believed as a country that has big Muslims population in the world. Therefore, Indonesia is considered as important country in the Muslim world. Even though Islam is not the native religion for Indonesian. However, Islam has been spread very fast and be converted by most of Indonesian.

Islam had been introduced to Indonesia in the first early of Islam by Muslim traders who came to Southeast Asia through silk link. Even though, many debates among Islamic scholars the exact date that Indonesian people convert to Islam.

However, it is believed that Muslims had interacted with Indonesian people in the early of Islamic era that was driven by rising trade links between Southeast Asia with people who came from outside of Asia.

Islam is believed to have been present in Southeast Asia from the time of the third caliph of Islam, 'Uthman' (644-656). According to Ricklefs<sup>1</sup> Muslim merchants and emissaries that traveled to China from the Islamic world must have passed Indonesia sea routes through Indonesia. The contact from Arabic merchants with Indonesia people happened between 10<sup>th</sup> and the mid-twelfth century where Sumatran trading state of Srivijaya may involve in this contact.

History of Islam in Indonesia can be considered as unique, because Islam is not only became one of factor to pushed all kingdoms in Indonesia (before Independent) to forming one of state as Indonesia, but also, Islam in Indonesia differs in it's characters and customs with Islam in different areas especially in the Middle East. Islam in Indonesia, trough assimilation had accommodated many local cultural from Hinduism and Buddhism that already existed before Islam, for example; the building of mosque in Demak that followed the structure of Hindu temple and the celebration of 'Sekatenan' that always is performed in the month of birth of Prophet Muhammad, this celebration was adopted from Hindu.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Islam in Indonesia has been considered as a source of fascination to research because of the ethnic complexity of the region. In fact, Indonesia is unique in that it supports a population wherein ethnic heterogeneity has been peacefully maintained throughout the centuries. Therefore, it can be found many 'Islam' in Indonesia, such as: Javanese

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<sup>1</sup>Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300* (2nd Edition, London: MacMillan, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>Nicholson, C. K., *The introduction of Islam into Sumatra and Java: A study in culture change*, (London: University Microfilms International, 1982), and Musyrifah Sunanto, *Sejarah peradaban Islam Indonesia*, (Jakarta: PT. Rajagrafindo Persada, 2005).

Islam, Minangkabau Islam, Sundanese Islam, Buginese Islam, Achenese Islam, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Islam is being one of the most important developments in Indonesian history. However, there is historical evidence that the understanding of history of the coming Islam in Indonesia is limited and still considerable debates among scholars about conversion of Indonesian people to Islam. The debates among scholars include the people who transfer Islam to Indonesia and the year of Islam was converted. For that reasons, this essay will try to explore more about issues, especially the people who introduced Islam to Indonesia.

### **The Theory of Early Islam in Indonesia**

As mentioned before that there is debate among scholars about who Islam introduce to Indonesia. Therefore, it is not easy to answer the questions of “when”, “why”, from “where” and “in what form” did Islam first impacted to Indonesia societies. This debate happened because there is no valid data to reconstruct the date of coming of Islam. On other side, the meaning of “Islam” differs between one scholar and others, for example; some scholars define it in formal definition as a person who converted Islam. Meanwhile, some of them defined it in sociology term as Islam community or society.<sup>4</sup>

The main evidences that can be found to identify the sign of Islam in Indonesia are Muslim gravestones and a few travelers that had noticed about Islam in Indonesia. However, this evidence can not give more details about how their lifestyles were affected by Islam and how deeply Islam affected to societies.

There are four opinions about the people who came to introduce Islam to Indonesia. One of them assumed that Islam was brought by India people, the second one from Arab, the

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<sup>3</sup>Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., & Hussain, Y., *Reading on Islam in Southeast Asia*, (Singapura: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Yusuf, M., et. el., *Sejarah peradaban Islam di Indonesia*, (Yogyakarta: Kelompok Penerbit Pinus, 2006).

third one from Persia, and the last one who thought that Islam came from China.

### *A. Theory of India*

This theory has been supported by Pijnappel, Snouck Hurgronje, Moquette, and Fatimi. According to them the spread of Islam in Indonesia started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century where Islam was introduced by India Muslims.

Pijnappel claims that many Indonesian Muslims in the first early of Islam, their religious practices were similar with Gujerat and Malabar (India) Muslims where Shaff'i school of law was common practiced. In addition these regions were mentioned so frequently in the first early of history of Archipelago. However, Pijnappel still believes that the preaching of Islam was from Arab but they did not come directly from the Arab countries, but from India, especially from Gujerat and Malabar.<sup>5</sup> However, this theory has been criticized by Morrison who argues that Gujerat and Malabar in that time was Hindu's kingdom, so, it is hard to believe that people from Gujerat may introduce Islam to Indonesia.<sup>6</sup>

Another theory was presented by Snouck Hurgronje who developed the intention of the South Indian beginning of Indonesian Islam. He argues that when Islam had gained a firm relation with the port cities of South India, the inhabitant of the Deccan who resided in the many port cities of this island became as middlemen in trading between the muslim states and Southeast include Indonesia where they can interact them and likewise to introduce Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Snouck also supports his theory by describing the romance of Achehnes (the first region of Indonesia who convert to Islam) that quite similar with the same part of South India romances where it was popular with mysticism and sacred

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<sup>5</sup>Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., & Hussain, Y., *loc. cit.*, and Azra, A., *Islam nusantara: Jaringan global dan local*, (Bandung: Mizan, 2002).

<sup>6</sup>Yusuf, M., et. el, *Loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., & Hussain, Y., *loc. cit.*

legends of the Muslim people. Moreover, he uses Ibn Batuta's note (a Moroccan traveler) to support his theory, where Ibn Batuta had explained that when he visited Pasa, Northern Sumatra in 1345 A. D. on his journey from Bengal to China he found there were three Muslim gravestones in Pasa district. Among these gravestones there was notice in granite of death of an Abbasid prince that he is a grandson of caliph al-Muntasir where he made his last resting place in Northern Sumatra in 1407 after his father had lived for along time at the expense of the Maharaja of Hindustan.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Snouck can not explain which part of South India that he meant in his explanation about similar romances between Achenehes and South India. Thereby, Alesandro Bausani an Italian scholar criticizes this theory. Bausani argues that based on philology words, at least 90% of the Persian words in Malay show concrete objects, meanwhile the India had only limited numbers, not even 10% of abstract or adjectival concepts that can be found, from this point he concludes that the Persian influences stronger than India in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup>

In other note, Ibn Batutah also wrote that the king of Samudra (Pasa) was a Muhammedan, who acted his religious obligations that based on the mazhab Imam Shafi'i where according to Ibn Batutah that his customs reminded him of those he had seen in India.<sup>10</sup>

However, Nurchalis Majid, one of prominent Muslim scholar in Indonesia, argues that in fact that India/Pakistan has acted their religious customs based on Imam Hanafi law that is different with most Indonesian Muslims religious customs where most of them Shafi'i.

## ***B. Theory of Arab***

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<sup>8</sup>Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., & Hussain, Y., *loc. cit*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>10</sup>Widjoatmodjo, R. A., Islam in the Netherlands East Indies. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 2, 1 (1942), pp. 48-57 Retrieved September 14, 2008 from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2049278>.

Another theory concludes that Islam was introduced from its original place of this religion namely Arabian. This theory has been supported by Sir Thomas Arnold, Naquib al-Attas, Crawfurd, Niemann, and de Hollander.

According to Arnold that the Arab merchants and traders had already dominated business activities in east and west in the early of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century, besides their business activities they also introduced Islam to the many regions that they visited including Indonesia.<sup>11</sup>

It is also interesting to report a Chinese note where he recorded the existence of an Arab settlement in San-Fu-Chi (Sriwijaya in east Sumatera) in 674 A. D. where it was headed by an Arab leader. Meanwhile, al-Masudi also recorded that there were large of Muslim emigration (mainly from Arab) into Asia in 877 A. D. he assumed around 120.000 or 200.000 Muslims' merchants and traders had settled in Khanfu (Canton). When the peasant in the South China conducted rebellion to the T'ang emperor Hi-Tsung, most of the Arab merchants and traders fled Canton and sought refuge to Kalah (Kedah) on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula that close to the east Sumatra, Palembang. This event according to Al-Attas<sup>12</sup> can be marked as the beginning of coming Islam to the region.

Furthermore, the Achehnese (Malay) chronicles describe that Islam was introduced in northern tip of Sumatra around 1112 A. D. by an Arab preaching namely, Shaykh Abdul Lah Arif. In the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* (one of the chronicle that is believed to be created in 14<sup>th</sup> century) recorded that the Syarif (the ruler) of Makkah sent Shaykh Ismail as a head of the mission to spread Islam in north Sumatra. It is believed that the Shaykh was successful to convert the king of Pasai, Merah Silu to Islam. After converting to Islam the king was named Malik-al-Shalih and died in 1279 A. D.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Arnold, 1913 in Yusuf, M., et. el, *Loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup>Al-Attas, N., *Preliminary statement on a general theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesia archipelago*, (Kuala Lumpur; Pechetakan Art, 1969).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*

*Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa's* chronicle (created in early 17<sup>th</sup>) has described that the ruler of Kedah (close to Sumatra) Phra Ong Mahawangsa, his ministers, and his people converted to Islam by Shaykh Abd Allah Yamani who came from Makkah (Arab), after converting to Islam the ruler of Kedah is named with Muzaffar Syah. Moreover, it is also written that the ancestor of Achehne's kings was came from Arab, his name was Shaikh Jamal al-Alam, he was sent by the ruler of caliph of Utsmaniyah to introduce Islam to Achehnes.<sup>14</sup>

Azra<sup>15</sup> a scholar from Indonesia concludes four points about Islam from those historical chronicles: first, Islam was introduced by Arab; second, the people who came to introduce Islam were professionals (scholars or preaching); third, the first people who convert to Islam from the rulers and other level of leaders; fourth, Islam in Indonesia came in the early period of Islam, then the influence of Islam became bigger in 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> until 16<sup>th</sup>.

However, it is important to remind that the sources from Indonesian chronicles are not strong enough to be evidence of the coming Islam. As Berg<sup>16</sup> says that Indonesia chronicles explains the first coming of Islam in legendary form. According to him these chronicles have no chronological order, and it is described the story too miracle.

### *C. Theory of Persia*

Theory of Persia is supported by P. A. Husain Djajadiningrat a scholar from Indonesia, who argues that Persian who introduced Islam to Indonesia in 13<sup>th</sup> century where Pasai was a centre for this missionary. According to him there are many similarities in religious customs and practices between Indonesia and Iran, these similarities could be considered as strong influences of Persian to Muslim's Indonesia. He gives examples such as: celebration of 10<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Hamka, "Masuk dan perkembangan agama Islam di pesisir Sumatera utara", (*Gema Islam*, XXXI, 1963).

<sup>15</sup>Azra, *Loc. cit*

<sup>16</sup>As cited in Widjojoatmodjo, R. A., *Loc. cit*

Muharram (Asyura day) in Indonesia that is also celebrated by Muslim Shiah in Persi, many doctrines of 'tasawuf' (mysticism) in Indonesia that quite similar with Persia's mystic (Hallaj), some Malay/Indonesian words that were derived from Arab were spelled in Persian.<sup>17</sup>

In the history of Riau/Sumatra it can be found information about Persian traders who came to Sriwijaya kingdom./Palembang in 9<sup>th</sup> century, where they also introduced Islam. It was pictured that they were around 35 people who came by ship from Sri Lanka where they stayed in Sriwijaya around 5 months then they continued their journey to China.<sup>18</sup>

#### ***D. Theory of China***

Another theory can be found in the information of the first arrival of Islam to Indonesia is the theory of China. This idea concludes that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century many Chinese from Canton and south China where many Muslims populations became refugee and departed to Kedah and Sumatra. They were refugees in period of Huan Chou dynasty when they had been forced to flee their region as a result of conflict between them and the dynasty.

According to Nurchalis Majid, one of the prominent scholar Muslims in Indonesia, this theory could be more correct than others. He analyses that it is hard to approve that Islam came from Arabic countries because most of Indonesian language that was derived from Islamic words (Arabic) have different pronunciations in Indonesian with Arabs. Nurchalis Majid concludes that it seems to him that have already derived from another language before deriving to Indonesia, it could be from Persian or the regions that has derived their language from Persia such as; Urdu (India), Pashto (afghan), Turk. So, Islam could be come from Gujarat, and south India. However, this theory is weak because Indonesia Muslim religious practices

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<sup>17</sup>Yusuf, M., et. al, *Loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup>Iqbal, M. Z., *Kafilah budaya pengaruh Persia terhadap kebudayaan Indonesia.* (Indonesia: Penerbit Citra, 2006).



were Shafi'i that was different with India where they were Hanafi.

Moreover, Nurchalis also criticizes the idea of early Islam that came from Yemen in south Arab. Even though, their religious practices were similar with Indonesian Muslims, namely shafi'i however, as above reason that different pronunciations between Indonesian and Arab in the Arabic language that was derived from Arab. Finally, he comes to conclude that the Muslims Chinese in south China could be the people who introduce Islam to Indonesia because their religious customs similar with Indonesia, namely; Shafi'i and their deriving language background from Persian can be accepted to above analyzing.<sup>19</sup>

This theory also can be approved from Ma Huan's 'General report of the coast of the Oceans'. Ma Huan was the Chinese Muslim who became Secretary Dragoman of one of the diplomat of the Chinese emperor Yung Lo. When he visited the regions in the period between 1405 and 1433 A.D. he recorded that in the northern part of Sumatra the region was already Islamic state, the king and people of Malacca in 1414 A. D. also had already been Muslims. Huan also wrote that in Java there were 'Foreign Muslims colonies' their native people still were Hindu and he recorded many Chinese immigrants, some of them Chinese Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

From many above different theories it can be considered that Islam in Indonesia is unique because Indonesia had been arrived from people in many different Muslim regions and cultures in the first coming of Islam.

It seems to me that Islam was not introduced by one region and culture of Islam but more, that way Islam in Indonesia is unique because had accepted many different Muslim backgrounds. Furthermore, it can be found that Islam in Indonesia has adopted some native religious customs (Hindu

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<sup>19</sup>Alqurtubi, S., *Arus China-Islam-Jawa*, (Yogyakarta: Inspeal Ahimsakarya Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup>Widjoatmodjo, R. A., *Loc. cit*

and Buddha), this adoption made Islam in Indonesia is considered different with Islam in other countries, especially middle east.

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