



Islamization and the Formation of Prototype Islamic Educational Institutions in the Nusantara: A Historical and Sociocultural Study

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Abstract

The Islamization process in the Nusantara brought significant changes to religious life, resulting in the emergence of distinctive Islamic educational institutions shaped by local cultures. This study aims to analyze the relationship between the Islamization process and the formation of prototype Islamic educational institutions in various regions of the archipelago. The research design employs a qualitative approach using literature study and historical-sociocultural analysis of historical documents and scholarly works. The findings reveal that Islamization, which occurred peacefully through trade networks, *da'wah* activities, and cultural acculturation, encouraged the development of educational institutions such as the *surau* in Minangkabau, *pesantren* in Java, and *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh. These institutions played a crucial role in transmitting Islamic teachings and shaping Muslim communities rooted in local values. The discussion highlights that the prototypes of Islamic educational institutions in the Nusantara are products of dialogue between Islam and local culture, rather than direct transfers of educational systems from the Middle East. These findings are relevant for the development of contemporary Islamic education that is contextual, inclusive, and grounded in local wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

The Islamization of the Nusantara region represents one of the greatest civilizational transformations in the history of Southeast Asia. Since the 7th century CE, Islamic influence began entering the archipelago through active trade routes connecting the Middle East, India, and the Malay world (Helmiati, 2014). This development became increasingly significant between the 13th and 17th centuries, marked by the rise of Islamic kingdoms such as Samudera Pasai, Malacca, Demak, Ternate, and Gowa. The Islamization process unfolded gradually and dialogically, permeating the social, cultural, and educational dimensions of local communities (Kuntowijoyo, 2008; Laffan, 2016).

Historically, Islamic education in the Nusantara evolved through traditional institutions such as the *surau* in Minangkabau, *pesantren* in Java, and *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh (Daulay, 2018; Suwito, 2004). These institutions functioned as centers for religious instruction, moral development, and the strengthening of Islamic identity rooted in local wisdom. The prototypes of these institutions developed through the integration of Islamic teachings with

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local cultural traditions, forming a distinctive character of Nusantara Islamic education that remained sensitive to the social context of its communities.

From a juridical perspective, the existence of Islamic educational institutions has been formally recognized in various national regulations. "Undang-undang No 20 Tahun, 2003" on the National Education System states that religious education is an integral part of the national education system. Additionally, "Peraturan Pemerintah No. 55 Tahun 2007" on Religious and Religious-Based Education provides a legal foundation for the existence and development of religious educational institutions, including *pesantren* and *dayah*. This demonstrates that the strengthening of Islamic educational institutions is a strategic constitutional mandate in developing human resources grounded in religious values.

Philosophically, Islamic education is not solely oriented toward the mastery of knowledge, but also toward shaping individuals who are faithful, ethical, and capable of living in social harmony (Rosdialena et al., 2024; Subaidi & Barowi, 2018). Traditional educational institutions in the Nusantara have long manifested these values in the daily practices of *santri* and surrounding communities. In the Indonesian context, local Islamic educational institutions represent an alternative model that cultivates spirituality and culture simultaneously.

Contemporary data show that the number of Islamic educational institutions has increased significantly. According to the 2023 report of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, more than 36,000 *pesantren* are actively operating across Indonesia with approximately 5 million *santri* (Kemenag, 2022). This phenomenon indicates that the prototype of Islamic education rooted in the historical Islamization process remains relevant and continues to contribute significantly to national educational development.

Previous studies, such as Azra (2017), highlight the existence of autonomous networks of scholars and Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Woodward (2010) examines how local Islamic adaptation has shaped the *pesantren* model. The research by Harmathilda et al., (2024) focuses on the dynamics of contemporary *pesantren* curricula. However, studies specifically linking the Islamization process with the formation of prototype Islamic educational institutions from a historical–sociocultural perspective across different regions of the Nusantara remain limited. This study positions itself within that gap, examining the relationship between Islamization and the development of local Islamic educational institutions as contextual intellectual and sociocultural heritage.

Using a historical approach and sociocultural analysis, this article seeks to provide a scholarly contribution to understanding the foundational structures of Islamic education in the Nusantara, as well as its urgency in shaping models of Islamic education that are responsive to the culture and needs of contemporary Indonesian society.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research and historical–sociocultural analysis (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018; Zed, 2008). This approach is selected to examine in depth the relationship between the Islamization process and the formation of prototype Islamic educational institutions in the Nusantara within their historical trajectory and surrounding sociocultural contexts.

The objects of analysis in this study (Moleong, 1989) (include various forms of Islamic educational institutions that developed as a result of Islamization across different regions, particularly the *surau* in Minangkabau, *pesantren* in Java, and *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh. These institutions are analyzed through a historical framework intersecting with local cultural dynamics, the transmission of Islamic knowledge, and their roles in shaping Muslim communities. The research instruments consist of documentary materials (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018), including written sources such as historical manuscripts, religious archives, scholarly literature, previous research findings, and relevant official government documents. Data were collected from various libraries, digital repositories, and Islamic studies centers.

The analytical techniques used are content analysis and contextual analysis (Zed, 2008). Content analysis is applied to identify key themes related to the Islamization process and the characteristics of local Islamic educational institutions. Contextual analysis is used to interpret the relationship between historical findings and the sociocultural conditions of the communities in each region studied. Data validation is carried out through source triangulation and academic interpretation based on authoritative literature in Islamic studies and the history of education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

General Findings On The Islamization Process In The Nusantara

Islam entered the Nusantara through international trade routes that had developed since the 7th century and reached their peak between the 13th and 17th centuries CE. Muslim traders from Gujarat, Arabia, and Persia played a crucial role in spreading Islamic teachings to the coastal regions of Sumatra and Java. The process unfolded peacefully and gradually through *da'wah*, cultural acculturation, and intermarriage between traders and local communities. Islamization in the Nusantara did not eradicate pre-existing traditions; rather, it produced a synthesis between Islam and local culture, resulting in distinctive forms of Islamic practice in each region (Azra, 2017). This process was not uniform but instead reflected contextual characteristics shaped by local social dynamics.

Strategic regions such as Aceh, Minangkabau, and Central Java became early centers of Islamic dissemination. In Aceh, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam fostered the development of Islamic study centers and networks of scholars. In Minangkabau, Sufi scholars integrated customary values with the teachings of *tasawwuf*. Meanwhile, in Java, the Sufi-oriented approach of the *Wali Songo* produced culturally grounded forms of *da'wah*, including through traditional arts and symbols. Historical records indicate that by the 17th century, Islamic educational institutions such as *surau* and *pesantren* had begun to emerge and played a vital role in nurturing local Muslim communities.

Prototype Islamic Educational Institutions Surau in Minangkabau

The *surau* is a distinctive form of Islamic educational institution in Minangkabau. It developed in the 17th century as a center for religious learning, particularly in *tasawwuf*, *fiqh*, and *tafsir*. The *surau* also served as a residential facility for teachers and students, as well as a space for the character formation of young men. A key figure in its development was Syeh Burhanuddin of Ulakan, a scholar of the Shattariyah order who educated students from various *nagari*. In Minangkabau's

matrilineal society, the *surau* functioned as an educational space for young men prior to marriage. Data from Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Sumatera Barat (2017) indicate that the *surau* possesses a strong social structure and dual functions as both a religious center and a social institution.

Pesantren in Java

The pesantren is the dominant form of Islamic educational institution in Java. It has grown since the era of the Wali Songo and expanded significantly during the 18th and 19th centuries CE. Its defining characteristics include the use of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), direct guidance under a *kiai*, and a boarding system. The pesantren is not only an institution of religious learning but also a center for *da'wah* and community empowerment. Dhofier & Dhofier (2011) argue that the pesantren possesses cultural strength due to its rootedness in personal relationships between *kiai* and *santri*, as well as its ability to assimilate local values into its educational system. According to data from Kementerian Agama RI (2022) more than 39,000 pesantren are currently active in Indonesia, with the majority located in Java.

Dayah and Meunasah in Aceh

In Aceh, Islamic educational institutions developed in two primary forms: *dayah* and *meunasah* (Raya, 2021). The *dayah* functions as a center for advanced religious studies, while the *meunasah* serves as a place for basic religious education and community religious activities such as study circles and congregational prayers (Rahman, 2021). These institutions have existed since the era of the Aceh Sultanate and remain integral to the social life of Acehnese society. Prominent figures such as Nuruddin ar-Raniri and Hamzah Fansuri contributed significantly to the structure and curriculum of the *dayah* (Ar-Rahmany, 2022). The Aceh Dayah Education Office (2021) reports that more than 1,200 *dayah* operate throughout Aceh, continuing to play a key role in preserving local Islamic traditions (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024a). To further clarify the characteristics of each institution, a comparative table is provided below:

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Islamic Educational Institutions in the Nusantara

Aspect	Surau (Minangkabau)	Pesantren (Java)	Dayah & Meunasah (Aceh)
Origins	17th century CE, influenced by the Shattariyah Sufi order	15th century CE, during the era of the <i>Wali Songo</i>	16th century CE, during the Aceh Sultanate
Key characteristics	<i>Nagari</i> -based, focused on <i>tasawwuf</i> , residence for young males	<i>Kitab kuning</i> , <i>kiai-santri</i> relationship, boarding system	Dayah: advanced religious education; Meunasah: basic religious instruction
Key figures	Shaykh Burhanuddin Ulakan	Sunan Ampel, Hasyim Asy'ari	Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin ar-Raniri
Social functions	Moral education, Sufi learning center, social space for youth	Center for religious knowledge, <i>da'wah</i> , and community	Islamic education and religious community center

Institutional structure	Informal, community-based	empowerment	Integrated into local socioreligious structure
Cultural context	Minangkabau culture (matrilineal, ABS-SBK)	Formal-traditional, led by a <i>kiai</i>	Acehnese tradition (ulama-umara norms, customary and sharia-based)
Recent data	Surau remain active in several <i>nagari</i>	>39,000 pesantren (MoRA RI, 2023)	>1,200 active dayah (Aceh Dayah Education Office, 2021)

Note. Adapted from (Azra, 2017; Baiza, 2018)

Local Forms of Islamic Educational Institutions

Various local Islamic educational institutions emerged as a result of the Islamization process that became deeply rooted in indigenous cultural values. The three main regions highlighted in this study Minangkabau, Java, and Aceh developed distinctive institutional models, namely *surau*, *pesantren*, and *dayah/meunasah* (Wati et al., 2022). Each institution functioned as a center for *da'wah*, education, and the development of local Islamic civilization. The *surau* served as the basis for Sufi education and Minangkabau adat, the *pesantren* grew into a center of classical Islamic scholarship and religious leadership in Java, while the *dayah* and *meunasah* operated as tiered educational institutions in Aceh.

These findings indicate that the prototypes of Islamic education in the Nusantara were formed through a long historical process and represent the outcome of interaction between Islam and local culture, rather than a direct adoption of Middle Eastern educational systems (Rosdialena et al., 2024). Strong local characteristics became the strengths that enabled each institution to respond to the needs and challenges of its respective society.

DISCUSSION

The Islamization Process and the Spread of Islamic Educational Institutions in the Nusantara

The Islamization process in the Nusantara unfolded peacefully and gradually through several strategic channels, including trade, *da'wah* activities by scholars, intermarriage between Muslim preachers and local communities, and cultural acculturation (Azizah et al., 2025; Fadhil, 2024). Islam did not arrive through military conquest but through prolonged social and cultural interaction (Lailatun & Mawardi, 2023). This approach allowed Islamic teachings to be accepted slowly by local communities and integrated into their social life. Over time, these processes established the foundations of muslim communities, which subsequently became the basis for the formation of distinctive Islamic educational institutions adapted to local cultures (Abdullah et al., 2025; Afandi, 2023).

Historically, Islam entered the Nusantara through international trade routes that expanded significantly from the 7th century CE and reached their peak between the 13th and 17th centuries CE (Permatasari & Hudaiddah, 2021; Sulistiono, 2021). Muslim traders from Gujarat, Arabia, and Persia played a major role in spreading Islam, particularly along the western coast of Sumatra and the northern coast of Java (Nasution, 2020; Setiawan & Sagara, 2024). Economic interactions between muslim

traders and local populations opened avenues for *da'wah*, which were later strengthened through social strategies such as intermarriage and community empowerment (Baron et al., 2025; Sulistiono & Muchsin, 2022). This indicates that Islam arrived not merely as a belief system but also as a social and cultural force.

According to Azra (2017); Baron et al. (2025), the Islamization of the Nusantara was not destructive to pre-existing traditions; instead, it produced a harmonious synthesis between Islam and local culture. The resulting forms of religiosity were contextual and rooted in the local wisdom of each region. Indigenous traditions, social systems, and cultural expressions were not eliminated but reinterpreted within the framework of Islamic teachings (Reid, 2024). Consequently, the Islamization process was not uniform across the region but reflected its diverse social and cultural landscapes.

In Aceh, the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate played a crucial role as a center for the dissemination of Islam and Islamic scholarship. The Sultanate established Islamic learning centers and built scholarly networks connecting Aceh with the broader Islamic world, particularly the Middle East (Kuru, 2021; Naldi, 2022). Figures such as Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniri exemplify scholars who not only mastered Islamic sciences but also contributed to the development of local culture. Educational institutions such as *dayah* and *meunasah* emerged as central spaces for transmitting religious knowledge and nurturing the Acehnese Muslim community.

In the Minangkabau region, Islamization progressed alongside the preservation of adat rooted in the matrilineal social system. Tarekat scholars, especially those connected to the Shattariyah order, successfully integrated Sufi teachings into the social life of the community (Dodi & Abitolkha, 2022). The *surau* became the main institution responsible for educating young men not only in Islamic knowledge but also in the values of adat and cultural heritage. Its existence as a community-based (*nagari*) educational institution reflects the adaptation of Islam to Minangkabau's distinctive social structure. Scholars such as Syeh Burhanuddin Ulakan became central figures in the consolidation of Islamic and cultural traditions (Nazirman et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, in Java, the Sufi-based approach employed by the *Wali Songo* played a key role in the success of Islamic propagation. Cultural forms of *da'wah*, such as *wayang* performances, traditional symbols, and architectural arts, were used to convey Islamic messages (Fahma, 2025). The *pesantren* began to develop in the 15th century as an Islamic educational institution characterized by the personal relationship between *kiai* and *santri*, the teaching of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), and the boarding system. Figures such as Sunan Ampel and Hasyim Asy'ari strengthened the *pesantren*'s role as a center for education, *da'wah*, and character formation for the muslim community in Java.

Typology of Local Islamic Educational Institutions

The Islamization process in the Nusantara gave rise to religious transformations that shaped distinctive Islamic educational institutions, each developing in accordance with local social and cultural dynamics (Feener, 2023; Zulman & Samad, 2024). The findings indicate that this process produced three major prototypes of local Islamic education: the *surau* in Minangkabau, the *pesantren* in Java, and the *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh (Muslim, 2021; Rohmah et al., 2023).

These institutions represent forms of creative adaptation to local contexts while simultaneously demonstrating the integration of Islamic values into the social structures of their respective communities (Fajrin & Taufikurrahman, 2021; Misnan & Herningrum, 2025). Beyond serving as centers for religious learning, each institution functions as an agent of value socialization, cultural reproduction, and the formation of collective Islamic identity.

In Minangkabau, the *surau* developed as a traditional educational institution with multifunctional roles, including providing religious instruction, spiritual and moral training, and serving as a residence for young unmarried men (*bujang*) before entering marriage (Sumbulah & Syaifuddin, 2024; Yacob & Mamat, 2022). Aside from transmitting Islamic knowledge, the *surau* played a key role in the dissemination of Sufi teachings—particularly the Syattariyah order—which expanded significantly from the 17th century onward through figures such as Shaykh Burhanuddin Ulakan (Rama, 2025; Sumbulah & Syaifuddin, 2024). Rooted in the *nagari* system and Minangkabau customary law, the *surau* embodies a synthesis of religious and sociocultural values that supports the internalization of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” and the consolidation of Minangkabau Islamic identity (Hasibuan, 2016; Mardika & Ramli, 2024).

Meanwhile in Java, the *pesantren* emerged as a prototype of Islamic education since the era of the *Wali Songo*, later gaining institutional consolidation through influential scholars such as Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Budiharso et al., 2023; Pribadi, 2022a; Syahid, 2021). The *pesantren* is characterized by close pedagogical relations between *kiai* and *santri*, the use of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), and a boarding system that cultivates discipline, piety, independence, and communal life (Achmadin et al., 2024; Ahimsa & Andriani, 2024; Rahmadani & Raharja, 2025). Today, *pesantren* stands as the most established and widespread Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, producing generations of Muslim scholars, public intellectuals, and agents of social change (Hajar, 2024; Halimah et al., 2024).

In Aceh, two complementary Islamic educational institutions developed historically: the *dayah* and the *meunasah* (Ar-Rahmany, 2022). The *dayah* (Kahar, 2021; Sabirin et al., 2021) serves as an advanced Islamic learning center for youth seeking intensive religious study, whereas the *meunasah* (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024) functions as a foundational community institution for basic religious education, worship, and socio-religious activities at the *gampong* (village) level (Raya, 2021). These institutions have existed since the Aceh Sultanate era and have played a crucial role in safeguarding religious authority and Acehnese Islamic identity. Prominent scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri significantly contributed to shaping Aceh's intellectual and spiritual traditions, positioning the *dayah* and *meunasah* as centers of Islamic scholarship, spiritual formation, and resistance against colonial structures (Pribadi, 2022; Sholehuddin et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Islamization process in the Nusantara not only shaped the religious identity of local communities but also produced distinctive prototypes of Islamic educational institutions rooted deeply in local culture, such as the *surau* in Minangkabau, *pesantren* in Java, and *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh. These

institutions served as centers for knowledge transmission, moral formation, and the preservation of localized Islamic values that emerged through a long history of social and cultural interaction. The findings demonstrate that Islamic education in the Nusantara evolved through a creative adaptation between Islamic teachings and local traditions, resulting in flexible, resilient, and contextually grounded institutional models. Based on these insights, future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across other regions of the Nusantara, explore the development of locally grounded curricula, and formulate new conceptual models that integrate the heritage of traditional Islamic educational institutions with the demands of contemporary society.

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