

# Malay-Nusantara Islamic Civilization: A Historical Comparison of the Roles of the Demak Sultanate and Brunei Darussalam

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**Abstract:** This study examines the comparative roles of the Sultanate of Demak and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in shaping Islamic civilization within the Malay–Nusantara region. The research is grounded in the need to understand Southeast Asian Islamic civilization as a product of religious propagation, maritime trade, and political interaction. The objective is to explain how both sultanates integrated religion and political authority to form distinctive Islamic governance rooted in local culture. Employing a historical–comparative method, the study analyzes primary sources such as classical manuscripts and chronicles, along with relevant secondary literature. The findings reveal that the Sultanate of Demak represents a revolutionary and transformational model of Islamic civilization, emphasizing Islamization through cultural propagation and community-based education. Conversely, the Sultanate of Brunei reflects an evolutionary and continuous model, institutionalizing Islamic values through the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) monarchy, which upholds stability, morality, and the continuity of Islamic law. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis of two complementary maritime Islamic paradigms: Demak as a catalyst for social transformation and Brunei as a guardian of monarchical continuity. The implications suggest the importance of strengthening academic and historical collaboration among ASEAN countries to enhance understanding of maritime Islamic civilization as a foundation for intellectual and cultural integration in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** the sultanate of Brunei, the sultanate of Demak, Islamic civilization, Malay history, Islamic politics, Islamization of the archipelago.



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## Introduction

Islamic civilization in the Malay-Nusantara region is the result of a long process of interaction between religious proselytizing, maritime trade, and political power that lasted for centuries. In this context, Islamic sultanates played a very important role as centers of political, economic, and spiritual power, which became the driving force for the spread and institutionalization of Islamic values in Southeast Asia. Two prominent entities with their own characteristics in building Islamic civilization in this region were the Demak Sultanate on the island of Java (Indonesia) and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in the northern part of the island of Kalimantan (Hall, 2025). These two sultanates not only marked an important phase in the history of Islamization, but also gave birth to models of Islamic government and culture that reflected a harmonious blend of Islamic teachings and local Malay-Nusantara traditions. The Demak Sultanate, which emerged in the late 15th century AD, is known as the first Islamic kingdom on the island of Java that had a major influence in spreading Islam throughout the northern coast of Java and the surrounding area (Milner, 2015).

Demak is a symbol of social and political transformation that marked the transition from a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom to an Islamic government that used Sharia law as the moral and ethical foundation of the state. Through the role of the Walisongo, Demak succeeded in integrating Islamic preaching with a local cultural approach, so that Islam was accepted peacefully and comprehensively by the Javanese people. Demak's influence also spread outside Java through trade and diplomatic networks with other Islamic kingdoms such as Malacca and Aceh, making it one of the pioneers in the maritime Islamic network of the archipelago (Azra, 2018). Meanwhile, the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam presented a different but equally important model of Islamic development. Established around the 14th century AD, Brunei reached its heyday under the leadership of Sultan Bolkiah in the late 15th to early 16th centuries. In the context of Islamic civilization history, Brunei is known for its ability to maintain political and cultural stability within the framework of a strong Islamic monarchy. Brunei not only made Islam its religious identity, but also the basis of its law, governance, and social morality, which has been passed down from generation to generation into the modern era. Even today, Brunei's Islamic monarchy system remains one of the most complete examples of the continuity of Islamic political tradition in the Malay world (Brown, 1995).

The two sultanates represent two different but complementary models of Islamic civilization development. The Demak Sultanate served as a pioneer of transformational Islamization—triggering radical changes in local political and cultural structures—while the Brunei Sultanate became an example of evolutionary Islamization, maintaining the continuity of Islamic values through an adaptive monarchy consistent with Sharia principles. Both show that Islam in the Malay-Archipelago region did not develop uniformly, but rather through a process of assimilation, adaptation, and internalization that was contextual to the social realities of each region (Reid, 1988). The research questions in this study focus on understanding the roles of the Demak Sultanate and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in building Islamic civilization in the Malay-Nusantara region, as well as exploring the similarities and differences in the patterns of Islamic civilization development that emerged between the two. This study also aims to explain how the integration of religion and power was manifested in the governmental systems of each sultanate, thereby forming a distinctive Islamic civilization rooted in the local socio-cultural context. In line with this, the objectives of this study are to describe the contributions of the Demak Sultanate and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in building Islamic civilization in the Malay-Nusantara region, analyze the differences and similarities in their models of Islamic civilization development, and explain how the relationship between religion and politics produced a model of government that reflected a moderate and inclusive maritime Islamic identity. Through this analysis, the study is expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of the formation of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia and its relevance to the strengthening of Islamic values in the contemporary context.

A comparative study between the Sultanates of Brunei and Demak is important to enrich our understanding of how the concept of Islamic civilization was built through the role of the state and political authorities, not solely by scholars or religious institutions. This study seeks to reveal how the two sultanates made Islam not only a religion, but also the basis of civilization—covering aspects of law, education, morals, and culture—which ultimately shaped the collective identity of the Malay-

Archipelago community (Gallop, 2019). Thus, this study is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the history of Islam in Southeast Asia, while also emphasizing that the legacy of Islamic civilization in this region is an integral part of the maritime and multicultural Islamic civilization of the world.

### **Research Method**

This study uses a historical-comparative approach that aims to understand and compare the roles of the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam and the Sultanate of Demak in building Islamic civilization in the Malay-Nusantara region. This approach was chosen because it is relevant to examining the socio-political and religious dynamics that developed in two Islamic kingdoms that differed in terms of time, space, and power structure, but shared the same spiritual and cultural orientation, namely the application of Islamic values as the basis of civilization (Antonius Dewanto Purnomo, 2024; Limas et al., 2025; Purnomo & Suparta, 2009; Suprajogi & Purnomo, Antonius Dewanto, 2024). Methodologically, this research begins with an exploration of historical sources through the collection of primary and secondary data. Primary sources include classical manuscripts such as *Hikayat Raja-Raja Brunei*, *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei*, and *Babad Demak*, as well as colonial documents and travel notes of scholars or merchants from the 15th to 19th centuries. Meanwhile, secondary sources include academic books, scientific articles, and modern historiographical works that examine the development of Islamization and the formation of Islamic government systems in Southeast Asia. Sources were selected based on historical validity, writing context, and the scientific credibility of the authors (Azra, 2018). The second stage is contextual and thematic analysis to identify the main elements that shaped Islamic civilization in each sultanate. This analysis covers the political dimension (power structure and Islamic legitimacy system), the social dimension (the role of scholars, the people, and Islamic educational institutions), and the cultural dimension (the assimilation of Islamic values with Malay and Javanese customs). Through this analytical framework, researchers seek to interpret how Islamic values were translated into the political policies and social practices of the two kingdoms (Azra, 2018).

The third stage is comparative analysis, in which the results of historical interpretations of each sultanate are compared to find similarities, differences, and common patterns that shape the character of Islamic civilization in the Malay-Archipelago region. This technique emphasizes not only chronological comparisons, but also a conceptual understanding of continuity and change in Islamic government systems in these two geographical contexts. Thus, this approach is not merely descriptive-historical, but also analytical, as it attempts to trace the cause-and-effect relationships behind the emergence, development, and continuity of Islamic values in the local political and cultural order (Azra, 2018). The final stage is the synthesis of the analysis results, which are formulated in the form of a descriptive-analytical scientific narrative. In this stage, the researcher integrates historical findings with a conceptual framework of Islamic civilization, namely that Islam as a system of values and civilization touches not only on religious aspects, but also on aspects of government, law, education, and culture. Through these methodological stages, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the contributions of the two sultanates to the formation of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia and to emphasize the important role of Islamic monarchy institutions in maintaining the continuity of Islamic traditions in the Malay-Archipelago region (Azra, 2018).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **The Demak Sultanate: Pioneer of Islamic Politics in Java and Driver of Islamization in the Archipelago**

The Demak Sultanate was established at the end of the 15th century AD, coinciding with the decline of Majapahit and the rise of Islamic influence in the northern coastal region of Java. Raden Patah, the founder of the Demak Sultanate, is believed to be the last descendant of Majapahit who converted to Islam, marking a major transition from a Hindu-Buddhist political structure to an Islamic system of government. Through the support of the Walisongo, particularly Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Ampel, and Sunan Kudus, the Demak Sultanate became not only a center of political power but also a center for the systematic and organized spread of Islam (Agus Sunyoto, 2016).

The role of Walisongo in assisting Raden Patah's administration was very important in shaping the character of Islam in the archipelago, which was accommodative to local culture. Islamic teachings were introduced through cultural media such as wayang, gamelan, tembang, and architecture, so that the process of Islamization took place peacefully and without coercion. The Grand Mosque of Demak, which was built during the reign of Raden Patah, became a symbol of integration between Islamic architecture and Javanese tradition. The three-tiered roof of the mosque symbolizes faith, Islam, and ihsan, while also emphasizing the symbolic syncretism between Islamic teachings and local philosophy (Agus Sunyoto, 2016).

From a political perspective, the Demak Sultanate introduced a form of Islamic government based on religious legitimacy, in which the sultan was seen as Zhillullah fil-Ardh (the shadow of God on earth), a worldly leader who had spiritual responsibility for his people. This structure of government was rooted in the concept of daulah Islamiyah but adapted to local Javanese values. Demak also played a role as protector of Muslims from the threat of Portuguese colonialism, which began to enter the archipelago in the early 16th century. Through military expeditions to Malacca and Jepara, Demak demonstrated its identity as a maritime Islamic power that actively fought for religious solidarity and political sovereignty (Agus Sunyoto, 2016).

In addition to political and military aspects, the Demak Sultanate also pioneered the establishment of a network of Islamic scholars and Islamic boarding schools in Java. The Islamic educational tradition developed in the Demak region gave rise to a generation of Islamic scholars who would later play an important role in spreading Islam to various regions such as Cirebon, Banten, and Palembang. Thus, the Demak Sultanate can be seen as the foundation for the formation of Javanese Islamic civilization, which became a model for subsequent Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago (Agus Sunyoto, 2016).

### **The Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam: Continuity of the Malay Islamic Monarchy and Resilience of Islamic Civilization**

The Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam has a long history dating back to the 14th century AD, with important figures such as Sultan Sharif Ali, who formally introduced Islamic law into the system of government. During the reign of Sultan Bolkiah (1485–1524), Brunei developed into a major maritime power in northern Kalimantan, controlling an area that now includes Sabah, Sarawak, part of the southern Philippines, and the surrounding islands (Brown, 1995).

This period marked the peak of political expansion and the spread of Islam, which made Brunei the center of Islamic civilization in northern Southeast Asia. Unlike Demak, which was transformative in nature, Brunei demonstrated a model of Islamic civilization that was continuous and adaptive. Islamic values were not presented as a revolution against the old order, but were gradually integrated into the existing Malay customary structure. The principle of Malay Islam Beraja (MIB), which remains Brunei's state philosophy to this day, is a manifestation of this synthesis—a blend of sultanate tradition, Islamic teachings, and Malay customs. MIB affirms that Islam is not merely a religion, but a moral, political, and social foundation in all aspects of state life (Brown, 1995).

In the field of law, the Sultanate of Brunei has consistently upheld the application of Islamic law. In pre-modern times, Sharia law was enforced alongside customary law through the Majlis Ugama Islam (Islamic Religious Council). In modern times, this principle has been embodied in the Syariah Penal Code Order (2013), which demonstrates the continuity of Islamic values from classical to contemporary times. In addition, Brunei also pays great attention to Islamic education, by establishing Islamic madrasas and universities that are oriented towards strengthening Islamic beliefs and values (Brown, 1995). From a cultural perspective, Brunei is a clear example of how Islamic can be at the core of national identity without negating traditional elements. Brunei's arts, language, and social system reflect Islamic values blended with Malay customs. The political stability that has been maintained for generations under the leadership of the sultan has made Brunei the only Islamic monarchy in Southeast Asia that has not been fully colonized by Western powers. This confirms that the continuity of Islamic values in the monarchy system has created extraordinary cultural and political resilience amid the tide of globalization and modernization (Brown, 1995).

## Political Legitimacy and Power Structures

The Sultanate of Demak and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam presented two different models of Islamic power legitimacy, even though both were rooted in religious principles. The Sultanate of Demak gained legitimacy through the spiritual and social network of the Walisongo, who acted as scholars, royal advisors, and spreaders of Islam among the coastal Javanese community. This system reflects a transformative and social form of legitimacy, in which political power gains validity through the community's acceptance of Islamic values that are disseminated peacefully and culturally. The moral and symbolic support of the Walisongo strengthened Sultan Raden Patah's authority as both a religious and political leader. Thus, Islam in Demak was not only an instrument of power, but also a medium of social change that strengthened social cohesion during the transition from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic rule. In contrast, the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam built institutional and continuous political legitimacy. In a historical context, the position of sultan in Brunei was not only the head of government, but also the holder of the highest spiritual authority in the Islamic monarchy system. This model of legitimacy has been preserved from generation to generation into the modern era through the philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), which affirms that Islam is the moral and ideological foundation of the state. MIB functions as an integrator between religion, customs, and power. Unlike Demak, which relied on the mobilization of social-ulama, Brunei maintained its power by institutionalizing religion within the state structure.

Conceptual analysis: Demak represents a *bottom-up* pattern of legitimacy based on social-religious networks, while Brunei displays a *top-down* pattern based on a monarchy structure. These two models explain the differences in the direction of Islamic civilization formation: Demak is revolutionary-transformational, while Brunei is evolutionary-continuative.

## Legal Instruments and Governance

In the legal dimension, the Demak Sultanate applied Islamic values through the internalization of social norms and a judicial system based on local wisdom. Although there is no evidence of formal legal codification such as *qanun*, Demak's justice system was run according to Sharia principles adapted to the social context of Javanese society. The role of Islamic boarding schools and clerics was an important part of the process of enforcing public morals and shaping the ethics of government. This made Islamic law in Demak more normative and moralistic rather than legalistic, but effective in shaping the religious awareness of the community.

Meanwhile, the Sultanate of Brunei exhibits a more institutionalized and legal-formal pattern. Since the reigns of Sultan Sharif Ali and Sultan Bolkiah, Islamic law has been an integral part of the government system, implemented alongside Malay customary law. In modern times, this continuity has become even more apparent through the Syariah Penal Code Order (2013), which affirms the application of Islamic law in Brunei's state system. This demonstrates Brunei's ability to maintain continuity between classical legal traditions and modern legal systems without losing its Islamic principles.

Analysis: The level of legal formality in Brunei shows consistency between religious legitimacy and state structure, while Demak relies on moral and social legitimacy to uphold justice. Brunei displays vertical integration between religion and state, while Demak prioritizes the internalization of values through education and culture.

## Islamic Education, Ulama, and Mechanisms of Islamization

The process of Islamization in Demak took place through cultural education and social preaching. The Walisongo introduced Islamic teachings through traditional media such as wayang, gamelan, and tembang, so that the preaching was accepted inclusively without conflict with Javanese customs. The Grand Mosque of Demak became a symbol of acculturation between Islamic values and local culture, reflecting the syncretism of religious architecture and Javanese-Islamic identity. Through a network of Islamic boarding schools in coastal areas, Islam grew organically and gave rise to a new generation of scholars who spread Islam to other regions such as Cirebon, Banten, and Palembang. Thus, Demak

became a center of socio-religious transformation that emphasized moderation and adaptation.

In contrast, in Brunei, Islamization took place institutionally and centrally under the supervision of the palace. Religious education has been part of the government system since the establishment of the Majlis Ugama Islam (Islamic Religious Council). Islamic values are developed through formal educational institutions such as madrasas, religious schools, and the Islamic University of Brunei Darussalam. The role of Islamic scholars in Brunei is bureaucratic and official, serving to enforce uniformity of teachings and ensure national ideological unity under the principles of MIB.

Conceptual analysis: Demak fostered Islam through *cultural* penetration, while Brunei did so through *state* institutionalization. Demak's model produced a pluralistic and flexible Islam, while Brunei's model created a stable and homogeneous Islam.

### **Maritime Expansion, Diplomacy, and Regional Networks**

Both sultanates played an important role in Southeast Asia's Islamic maritime network. The Demak Sultanate played an active role in establishing Islamic maritime trade and diplomatic networks through ports on the north coast of Java. Raden Patah and his successors established relations with other Islamic kingdoms such as Malacca, Aceh, and Ternate. Military expeditions to Malacca and Jepara were motivated not only by politics but also by religion—as an effort to maintain Islamic solidarity against Portuguese colonial forces. Demak, therefore, became a symbol of a dynamic and progressive maritime Islamic identity.

The Sultanate of Brunei, on the other hand, expanded its influence in northern Kalimantan, Sabah, Sarawak, and the southern Philippines through diplomacy, trade, and regional sultanate networks. During the reign of Sultan Bolkiah, Brunei reached the peak of its glory as a stable maritime power. Brunei's expansion strategy was non-confrontational and diplomacy-oriented, demonstrating the kingdom's ability to maintain political stability while expanding the influence of Islam through cultural and economic integration.

Analysis: Demak used an expansive and revolutionary approach to expand Islamization, while Brunei pursued a path of diplomacy and political continuity. These differing strategies reflect two complementary paradigms of Islam propagation: *transformational da'wah* and *diplomatic da'wah*.

### **Comparative Analysis: The Integration of Religion and Power in Two Models of Malay-Nusantara Islamic Civilization**

From the results of the comparative analysis, it can be concluded that the Demak Sultanate and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam represent two different but complementary models of Islamic civilization development. Demak presents a revolutionary-transformative model, which marks a radical change from a non-Islamic royal system to an Islamic government system with the support of a network of scholars. Meanwhile, Brunei shows an evolutionary-continuous model, in which Islam is preserved and integrated into the traditional and monarchical structures without causing significant social conflict (Hall, 2025).

In the geopolitical context, Demak served as the center of maritime Islamic expansion in the south, while Brunei became a stronghold of Islam in the northern region of the archipelago. Both played a strategic role in forming a Southeast Asian maritime Islamic network, characterized by diplomatic relations, trade, and cross-regional proselytizing. This shows that the Islamic civilization of in the archipelago was not the result of a single mission, but rather a product of collaboration between political and religious entities that shared a vision of Islam as a guideline for society (Hall, 2025) (Gallop, 2019).

In terms of values and orientation, the Demak Sultanate emphasized social change and religious reform, while the Brunei Sultanate emphasized spiritual preservation and stability. However, both had a common thread, namely using religion as a source of legitimacy for power and public morality. In Islamic civilization terminology, both reflect two sides of the same process: *ijtihad* in adapting Islam to local realities while maintaining its universal essence (Gallop, 2019) (Milner, 2015).

This analysis reinforces the view that the development of Islamic civilization in the Malay-Archipelago region was not homogeneous, but pluralistic and contextual. Islamic civilization in this region grew through the ongoing dynamic dialogue between Islamic teachings and local cultures. Thus,

the Sultanates of Demak and Brunei can be understood not only as political kingdoms, but also as laboratories of Islamic civilization that produced a model of religiosity unique to the archipelago—moderate, inclusive, and deeply rooted in universal human values (Reid, 1988).

## Conclusion

This study shows that the Demak Sultanate and the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam played an important role in building and developing Islamic civilization in the Malay-Archipelago world. Both proved that Islam in Southeast Asia did not only function as a religion, but also as a civilizational force that influenced the politics, law, education, economy, and culture of society. The Demak Sultanate presented a transformative model, namely the process of Islamization through cultural da'wah and socio-political reform based on spiritual values without erasing local identities. Meanwhile, the Brunei Sultanate presented an evolutionary model, namely the continuity of the Islamic monarchy system that blended harmoniously with Malay customs through the philosophy of Malay Islam Beraja (MIB). These two models illustrate the diversity of Islamic expression in the archipelago, which grew through dialogue between Islamic teachings and local culture. The success of Islamization in this region was not determined by political or military power, but by Islam's ability to adapt to local values such as tolerance, justice, deliberation, and mutual cooperation. This study emphasizes the importance of political ethics, moral education, and respect for local wisdom in building a sustainable Islamic civilization. For further study, research can be expanded to other sultanates such as Aceh Darussalam, Ternate, and Sulu so that the understanding of Malay-Archipelago Islamic civilization becomes more comprehensive and continuous.

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