

FROM MARITIME CONNECTIVITY TO COLONIAL HEGEMONY: REASSESSING ISLAMISATION, TRADE AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE ARU ISLANDS, EASTERN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the socio-historical transformation of the Aru Islands in Eastern Indonesia by analysing the transition from an Islamic cosmopolitan maritime society to European colonial domination between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study aims to explain how maritime trade networks facilitated the spread of Islam, shaped local cosmopolitanism, and were subsequently transformed through colonial intervention. Employing a qualitative historical approach that integrates archival research, archaeological evidence, ethnographic interviews, and secondary historical sources, this study reconstructs the changing political, economic, and religious landscape of the Aru Islands. The findings demonstrate that the Aru Islands functioned as an important peripheral node within the wider Islamic maritime network connecting Maluku, Banda, Sulawesi, and Papua. European colonial expansion fundamentally altered these networks by imposing commercial monopolies, restructuring local authority, and introducing new religious and political institutions. Rather than replacing local traditions entirely, colonial rule produced a complex interaction between continuity and transformation in Islamic and maritime life. This study contributes to the historiography of Eastern Indonesia by positioning the Aru Islands as an active participant in regional maritime history rather than merely a peripheral frontier of colonial expansion.*

Keywords: *Aru Islands; Islamic cosmopolitanism; maritime history; colonialism; Eastern Indonesia; Maluku.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic state, strategically located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and connecting Asia with Australia. Its geographical position has historically made the archipelago a major crossroads of maritime trade, migration, and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, Indonesian historiography has traditionally emphasized political developments on land, while the maritime dimension that shaped the formation of regional societies has received comparatively less attention (Lapian, 2011). Among the regions that played an important role in these maritime interactions were the Maluku Islands, internationally known as the "Spice Islands," whose production of cloves and nutmeg attracted traders from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe for several centuries (Azra, 2021; Reid, 2014).

Within this maritime world, the Aru Islands occupied a strategic position at the southeastern frontier of Maluku. Located between Maluku and the Papuan coast, the islands functioned as an important node connecting regional trade routes linking Banda, Kei, Seram, Sulawesi, and Papua. In addition to their valuable marine resources, the Aru Islands became a meeting place for merchants, migrants, and religious communities, facilitating the circulation of commodities, ideas, and beliefs. These long-distance interactions contributed to the emergence of a cosmopolitan social environment in which Islam developed through commercial and cultural exchange rather than military conquest.

Previous scholarship has examined various aspects of Maluku's maritime history, including the spice trade (Reid, 2014), the political economy of the Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore (Andaya, 1993; 2015), Islamic cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia (Azra, 2021; Aljunied, 2018), and the archaeology of the Aru Islands (Handoko, 2015; Veth et al., 2006). While these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of maritime Southeast Asia, they tend to focus either on major Islamic sultanates, colonial commercial networks, or archaeological discoveries. Consequently, the socio-historical role of the Aru Islands as a peripheral yet highly connected node within Islamic maritime networks remains insufficiently explored. Likewise, limited attention has been given to how Islamic cosmopolitanism in the Aru Islands was transformed through the expansion of European colonial power.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the historical transformation of the Aru Islands from an Islamic maritime society characterized by cosmopolitan interactions to a region increasingly shaped by European colonial domination. Rather than treating the Aru Islands merely as a peripheral frontier, this article argues that they constituted an active participant in regional maritime networks that connected Eastern Indonesia with wider commercial and religious worlds.

Accordingly, this article addresses three research questions. First, how did Islamic maritime networks shape the cosmopolitan character of the Aru Islands? Second, how did European colonial expansion transform these networks and local socio-political structures? Third, what does this historical transformation contribute to our understanding of maritime Islam and colonial history in Eastern Indonesia?

To answer these questions, this study aims to reconstruct the socio-historical transformation of the Aru Islands by integrating perspectives from maritime history, Islamic studies, archaeology, and historical sociology. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the article investigates the interaction between trade, religion, and political power in shaping the historical development of the islands.

This article contributes to the historiography of Eastern Indonesia in three important ways. First, it repositions the Aru Islands from a marginal frontier to an active maritime hub within regional Islamic networks. Second, it demonstrates how Islamic cosmopolitanism was historically embedded in commercial exchange and intercultural interaction before being reconfigured under European colonial rule. Third, by combining historical, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence, this study offers a more integrated interpretation of the relationship between maritime trade, Islamization, and colonial transformation in the eastern Indonesian archipelago.



Picture 1. Aru Islands in Maluku (Moluccas) Province, Indonesia



Picture 2. Aru Islands, Maluku (Moluccas), Indonesia

¹ Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Center for the Study of Language and Informationm Stanford, CA: The Metaphysics Research Lab, 2004. See, Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2006, p. xiv.

² Azyumardi Azra, *Kosmopolitan Islam*; risalah, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 20 September 2021



Picture 3. Aru Islands landscape



Picture 4. VOC ships sailed in the archipelago, hunting for spices in the 17th-19th century

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical research design using an interdisciplinary framework that integrates maritime history, historical sociology, archaeology, anthropology, and ethnography. The interdisciplinary approach is intended to reconstruct the socio-historical transformation of the Aru Islands by examining the interaction between maritime trade, Islamization, local society, and European colonial expansion from approximately the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Rather than relying on a single disciplinary perspective, the study combines historical reconstruction with archaeological and ethnographic evidence to explain long-term social and cultural change in the Aru Islands.

Data Sources

This research is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archaeological reports on the Aru Islands, historical maps, colonial documents, travel accounts, and oral histories collected from local communities. Archaeological evidence, particularly from Ujir Island and surrounding settlements, provides information on ancient settlements, trade networks, Islamic material culture, ceramics, traditional fortifications, and colonial structures. Historical documents produced during the Portuguese and Dutch colonial periods, together with early travel narratives, are used to reconstruct commercial networks and political developments in the region.

Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, archaeological reports, historical monographs, and previous studies on Maluku's maritime history, the spice trade, Islamization in Eastern Indonesia, colonialism, and Islamic cosmopolitanism. These sources provide both historical context and theoretical perspectives for interpreting the empirical findings.

Fieldwork and Informants

Fieldwork was conducted in several locations within the Aru Islands, particularly in Ujir, Wokam, FROM MARITIME CONNECTIVITY TO COLONIAL HEGEMONY: REASSESSING ISLAMISATION, TRADE AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE ARU ISLANDS, EASTERN INDONESIA

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Dobo, and Wamar [please specify the period of fieldwork]. Data collection involved direct observation of historical and archaeological sites as well as interviews with local community members who possess historical knowledge of the region.

The ethnographic component of the research involved semi-structured interviews with [please specify the number] informants, including community elders, religious leaders, local historians, cultural practitioners, and village residents. Informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge of local history, oral traditions, religious development, and cultural heritage. Oral testimonies were not treated as independent historical facts but were critically compared with archaeological evidence and written historical sources.

Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary techniques. First, documentary research was undertaken to examine archival materials, historical literature, archaeological publications, and previous scholarly works relevant to the history of the Aru Islands. Second, field observation was conducted at historical settlements, ancient mosques, traditional fortifications, archaeological remains, and former trading sites to document material evidence associated with Islamization and colonial encounters. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out with selected informants to document local historical memories, oral traditions, and community interpretations of historical events. Fourth, visual documentation, including photographs, maps, and site records, was compiled to support historical interpretation and facilitate comparison between documentary and archaeological evidence.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using qualitative historical analysis. Historical documents were examined through source criticism, including both external criticism to evaluate the authenticity of sources and internal criticism to assess their credibility and historical context. Archaeological evidence was interpreted alongside documentary sources to reconstruct patterns of settlement, trade, and religious development. Interview data and field observations were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to maritime trade, Islamic cosmopolitanism, local authority, and colonial transformation. The findings from different sources were subsequently compared through data triangulation to strengthen the validity and reliability of the historical interpretation. The integration of documentary, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence enables a more comprehensive reconstruction of long-term historical processes than reliance on a single type of source.

Interdisciplinary Analytical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary analytical framework in which each discipline contributes a complementary perspective. Maritime history provides the basis for reconstructing commercial networks and regional interactions. Archaeology contributes material evidence concerning settlements, trade commodities, Islamic sites, and colonial remains. Anthropology and ethnography provide insights into local cultural traditions, oral histories, and collective memory, while historical sociology is employed to analyse the transformation of social institutions, religious authority, and political relations under European colonial rule. The integration of these approaches enables the study to move beyond a purely chronological historical narrative by explaining how economic networks, religious expansion, material culture, and social institutions interacted in shaping the historical development of the Aru Islands. This interdisciplinary framework also allows the Aru Islands to be understood not merely as a peripheral frontier of Maluku but as an active participant in wider Islamic maritime networks across Eastern Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

Islamic Maritime Cosmopolitanism in the Aru Islands

The emergence of Islamic cosmopolitanism in the Aru Islands was closely connected to the expansion of maritime trade across Southeast Asia rather than to military conquest or centralized political authority. Situated on the southeastern frontier of the Maluku archipelago, the Aru Islands became part of a wider commercial network linking the Banda Islands, Ternate, Tidore, Java, Sulawesi, the Malay world, and the Indian Ocean.

Muslim merchants, sailors, and religious scholars facilitated not only the circulation of spices and marine commodities but also the diffusion of Islamic beliefs, social practices, and cultural values. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that maritime commerce constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which Islam spread across the Indonesian archipelago (Reid, 2014; Azra, 2021; Andaya, 1993). Rather than replacing local traditions, Islamic expansion in Eastern Indonesia generally occurred through gradual cultural accommodation and commercial interaction. This process produced what Aljunied (2018) describes as Islamic cosmopolitanism—a social order characterized by openness, religious coexistence, and cross-cultural exchange. Within the Aru Islands, archaeological remains, oral traditions, and historical records indicate that Islam became embedded in local society through sustained maritime interaction. Markets, ports, and coastal settlements functioned not merely as commercial centers but also as spaces where diverse ethnic and religious communities negotiated social relationships. Consequently, Islamic cosmopolitanism in Aru should be understood as a product of maritime connectivity that integrated local communities into broader regional networks.

The Aru Islands as a Peripheral Maritime Hub

Although previous studies have focused primarily on the political centers of Ternate, Tidore, and Banda, the findings of this study demonstrate that the Aru Islands also played an important—albeit peripheral—role within the maritime economy of Eastern Indonesia. Rather than functioning as an isolated frontier, Aru served as an intermediary node connecting coastal Maluku with Papua and the eastern Indonesian seas. Historical documents indicate that commodities originating from Aru—including pearls, sea cucumbers, bird-of-paradise feathers, parrots, turtle shells, and other marine products—were exchanged through commercial routes centered on Banda and subsequently distributed to wider Asian and European markets. This commercial role explains why foreign merchants, including Portuguese and Dutch traders, gradually incorporated Aru into regional trading systems despite the absence of a major Islamic sultanate. Archaeological evidence further strengthens this interpretation. The discovery of Chinese ceramics dating from the Ming and Qing periods, Japanese Hizen ware, European ceramics, Islamic burial complexes, and settlement remains suggests sustained commercial interaction between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These materials demonstrate that Aru participated actively in long-distance exchange networks and should therefore be interpreted as a connected maritime hub rather than a marginal or isolated island group.

Colonial Commercial Restructuring

The arrival of European colonial powers fundamentally altered the organization of maritime trade in Eastern Indonesia. Whereas earlier commercial networks were relatively open and characterized by multiple trading partners, Portuguese and subsequently Dutch expansion introduced monopolistic institutions that reorganized regional commerce according to colonial interests. The establishment of VOC authority transformed trade from a decentralized network into a centralized colonial economy. Commercial routes were redirected toward Dutch-controlled ports, while local producers increasingly became integrated into systems of monopoly and compulsory exchange. Historical evidence indicates that the Aru Islands were incorporated into this colonial commercial structure because of their strategic location and valuable natural resources, particularly pearls, sea cucumbers, birds of paradise, and other export commodities. Rather than viewing colonialism solely as political domination, this study argues that its most immediate impact in Aru occurred through the restructuring of maritime economic networks. Colonial commercial policies altered patterns of mobility, exchange, and regional interaction that had previously sustained Islamic maritime cosmopolitanism.

Colonial Hegemony and Religious Transformation

European colonial expansion also reshaped the religious landscape of the Aru Islands. Although archaeological evidence indicates the existence of Islamic settlements prior to intensive Dutch administration, colonial intervention transformed both the spatial organization and institutional development of Muslim communities. Evidence from Ujir Island—including ancient settlements, Islamic cemeteries, ceramics, and architectural remains—suggests that Islamic communities had already emerged through commercial interaction before colonial consolidation. Oral traditions concerning the adaptation of former colonial buildings into mosques further illustrate the complex interaction between indigenous agency and colonial material culture. Rather than eliminating Islamic institutions, colonial rule reconfigured their social and political functions within a new administrative order. This transformation illustrates that religious change in Aru cannot be interpreted solely through narratives of conversion or resistance. Instead, Islam developed

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through continuous negotiation among local traditions, commercial exchange, and colonial governance.

Continuity and Change in Eastern Indonesian Maritime History

The historical trajectory of the Aru Islands demonstrates both continuity and transformation within Eastern Indonesian maritime history. Continuity is reflected in the persistence of maritime mobility, commercial exchange, and local cultural institutions that survived successive political transitions. Local traditions such as letay, Ursiuw–Urlim, and communal cooperation continued to shape social organization despite external political change. At the same time, significant transformations occurred as Islamic maritime networks became progressively integrated into European colonial systems. The shift from relatively open commercial exchange to monopolistic colonial trade altered patterns of regional interaction and reduced the autonomy of local maritime communities. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence and oral traditions indicate that local society actively adapted to these changing circumstances rather than functioning merely as passive recipients of external influence. These findings contribute to broader debates on maritime Southeast Asia by demonstrating that peripheral islands such as Aru were active participants in regional Islamic networks before colonial intervention. The study therefore challenges center-oriented historiography that privileges Ternate, Tidore, and Banda while overlooking the historical significance of smaller island societies. By integrating archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence, this research reinterprets the Aru Islands as a dynamic maritime frontier where commerce, religion, and colonialism interacted to shape long-term socio-historical transformation.

CONCLUSION

Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that the Aru Islands were not an isolated peripheral region but an active participant in the Islamic maritime networks of Eastern Indonesia. The findings show that maritime trade connected Aru with Banda, Ternate, Tidore, Papua, and wider Indian Ocean commercial routes, facilitating the circulation of people, commodities, and Islamic ideas. Archaeological evidence, historical records, and oral traditions further indicate that European colonial expansion fundamentally transformed these maritime networks by replacing relatively open systems of exchange with monopolistic commercial structures, thereby reshaping both economic relations and the development of local Muslim communities.

The study contributes to the historiography of maritime Southeast Asia by reinterpreting the Aru Islands as a connected maritime frontier rather than a marginal periphery. While previous scholarship has largely emphasized the political and commercial dominance of Ternate, Tidore, and Banda, this research highlights the historical significance of smaller island societies in sustaining regional Islamic networks. Methodologically, the integration of historical, archaeological, ethnographic, and historical sociological evidence provides a more comprehensive understanding of how maritime connectivity, religious change, and colonial intervention interacted over the long term.

These findings have broader implications for the study of Eastern Indonesian maritime history. They suggest that analyses of Islamization and colonialism should move beyond state-centered or sultanate-centered perspectives by recognizing the agency of peripheral island communities within wider regional networks. The case of the Aru Islands illustrates that maritime frontiers functioned as dynamic spaces of cultural interaction, commercial exchange, and religious transformation rather than merely as passive recipients of external influence.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The availability of primary historical sources for the Aru Islands remains limited, particularly for the period preceding intensive European documentation. Consequently, the reconstruction of early Islamic maritime networks relies on the triangulation of archaeological evidence, colonial archives, oral histories, and secondary historical literature. In addition, archaeological investigations remain geographically concentrated in several locations, particularly Ujir Island, which may not fully represent the historical diversity of the wider Aru archipelago.

Future research should expand archaeological surveys and archival investigations across other islands in the Aru archipelago while incorporating comparative studies with neighboring maritime regions such as Kei, Banda, Seram, and the Papuan coast. Greater integration of environmental history, maritime archaeology, and digital mapping of historical trade routes would further enhance our understanding of the spatial dynamics of Islamic maritime networks and colonial commercial transformation in Eastern Indonesia.

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