

## INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SCHOLARS FROM JAVA (INDONESIA), MELAKA (MALAYSIA) AND CHAMPA (VIETNAM) DURING THE 15<sup>TH</sup> – 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

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Received: 30 October 2024

Accepted: 30 November 2024

Published: 31 December 2024

**Abstract:** In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) became the centre of education and Islamic expansion in Southeast Asia. Islam expanded exponentially in the region, from Melaka, Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, Lombok to Champa. Melaka was a vital port, serving as a meeting place for rulers and traders from various parts of the world, while Java became a destination for Islamic scholars from different regions. The ulama (Islamic scholars) from Nusantara, such as the *Walisongo* (Nine Saints) in Java, played a significant role in the propagation of Islam in this region. This study aimed to investigate how the ulama from Java, Melaka and Champa interacted in efforts to propagate Islam during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It used the historical analysis method to compile and analyse past events, which included gathering sources, historical documents, selecting data, analysing data and interpreting data, and. Data sources mainly comprised relevant secondary sources and historical reports from Demak Bintara, Melaka and Champa. Findings of this study indicate that the ulama from Java, Melaka, and Champa had close relationships and exchanged knowledge to consolidate and expand the influence of Islam in Nusantara. The Nusantara ulama introduced Islam through peaceful means and also enhanced social, political, and economic networking between regions in Southeast Asia. The study offered new insight into the role of Melaka as a facilitator of religious change in Southeast Asia. The Melaka port was not only a trading centre but also an important hub for the Islamic propagation network in the Southeast Asia region, while Java became the centre of Islamic education in Nusantara.

**Keywords:** Ulama, Nusantara, Malacca, Jawa, Champa



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### Cite This Article:

Ali Romdhoni, Noorsafuan Che Noh & Ezad Azraai Jamsari. (2025). Interactions Between Scholars from Java (Indonesia), Melaka (Malaysia) and Champa (Vietnam) during the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries. *UFUQ International Journal of Arts and Social Science Research*, 5(1), 29-45.

## INTRODUCTION

Nusantara, particularly the island of Java and the Sultanate of Melaka, emerged as the centre for Islamic education and expansion in Southeast Asia in the 15th century (Wijaya, 2022, p. 2). Islam expanded rapidly across various regions during this period, including Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku and Lombok. Java became a primary destination for Islamic students, not only from within Nusantara but also from the Arab world (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 25). Nusantara's Islamic scholars, such as the *Walisongo* from Java, played a crucial role in the propagation of Islam in the region. One of the central figures in the propagation of Islam in Java was Sunan Ampel, originally from the Kingdom of Champa (Olthof, 1941, p. 20), which incidentally highlights the close connection between Java and Champa in efforts to propagate Islam (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 86).

The Sultanate of Melaka also emerged as a key centre in the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia (Meinsma, 1874, p. 27). Melaka's port, one of the most significant trading hubs in the world at the time, served as a meeting place for rulers and merchants from across the globe, who not only engaged in trade, but also propagated Islam peacefully (Abdul Latif Abu Bakar, 1984, p. 28). During the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah (1456-1477), Melaka became a focal point for the propagation of Islamic teachings, which attracted Muslim traders from Arabia, India, and Persia, who simultaneously conducted trade and propagated Islam throughout Southeast Asia (Dasuki bin Haji Ahmad, 1987, p. 532).

Interaction between scholars from Java, Melaka and Champa illustrates the strong ties between these three regions in their efforts to propagate Islam across Nusantara and Southeast Asia. Scholars from these different regions exchanged knowledge and experiences, while contributing to the peaceful and inclusive expansion of Islam throughout Nusantara.

This study focused on examining the interactions and collaborations between scholars from three key regions in Southeast Asia, namely Java, Melaka and Champa, in their efforts to propagate Islam during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Previous studies have extensively discussed the individual roles of each region in the propagation of Islam; however, this study highlights how the close relationships and exchange of knowledge between scholars from these three regions were critical in strengthening and expanding Islamic influence in Nusantara and Southeast Asia as a whole.

It analysed the peaceful strategies adopted by Islamic scholars in their efforts to propagate Islam. It offers a new perspective by examining how these peaceful approaches, practiced across various kingdoms and sultanates, not only succeeded in spreading the religion but also strengthened social, political, and economic networks between regions in Southeast Asia.

In addition, it also provides new insight into the role of Melaka as a facilitator of religious change in Southeast Asia; demonstrating how this port city functioned not only as a trading hub but also as a crucial link in the Islamic propagation network in the region. Hence, it integrates interdisciplinary perspectives, such as historical, social, political, and economic perspectives, when examining interactions of scholars and propagation of Islam in Southeast Asia during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a comprehensive approach that has not been widely explored in previous research.

The propagation of Islam in Nusantara has been a focus of Islamic historical studies in Southeast Asia for several decades. Many earlier studies have highlighted the key role of Islamic scholars and kingdoms in the propagation of the faith, especially in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The island of Java played a significant role as a centre for Islamic education and dissemination, where local scholars interacted with students from various regions (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 86). The expansion of Islam in Java was initiated by Islamic scholars, or *wali*, known as the *Walisongo* (*Nine Saints*). Most of these scholars studied under Sunan Ampel, an Islamic scholar from Champa and they collectively played a vital role in propagating Islamic teachings to other regions, such as Banjar, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Lombok. The Sultanate of Demak Bintara, established by these scholars, became the centre of political and religious power in Java during that period (Agus Sunyoto, 2019, p. 123) (Ngationo, 2018).

In the Malay peninsula (modern-day Malaysia), the Sultanate of Melaka became a centre for both trade and the expansion of Islam (Abdul Latif Abu Bakar, 1984, p. 28). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Sultanate of Melaka emerged as a strategic international trading hub, playing a crucial role in the propagation of Islam throughout Southeast Asia. Melaka's port served as a meeting place for rulers, merchants and Islamic scholars from various parts of the world, making it a centre for the peaceful dissemination of Islamic teachings. Sultan Mansur Shah (1456–1477) actively facilitated the expansion of Islam in the region by involving Muslim traders from Arabia, India, and Persia in this process (Dasuki bin Haji Ahmad, 1987, p. 532). During this period, both Melaka and Java were key centres for Islamic growth in Southeast Asia (Al-Aboudi, 2021, p. 506).

In addition to Java and Melaka, the Kingdom of Champa also played a role in the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia. Sunan Ampel, an Islamic scholar from Champa, eventually settled in Java (Olthof, 1941, p. 20). Sunan Ampel, also known as Raden Rahmat, was the son of Ibrahim al-Samarqandi. Maulana Ishaq and Ibrahim al-Samarqandi were brothers, and both were the sons of Syeh Jumadil Kubra of Persia (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 3). *Babad Tanah Djawi* recounts how Ibrahim al-Samarqandi came to Champa to introduce Islam and married Princess Candrawulan, the daughter of the King of Champa (Olthof, 1941, p. 18). Maulana Ishaq, on the other hand, travelled to Java, married the King of Blambangan's daughter, and later settled in Melaka. His marriage to the Princess of Blambangan resulted in the birth of Sunan Giri. According to *Babad Tanah Djawi*, the man who married the Princess of Blambangan and fathered Sunan Giri was known as Syeh Wali Lanang (Olthof, 1941, p. 21).

Interactions between scholars from Java, Melaka and Champa reveal a strong intellectual and spiritual network that supported the expansion of Islam in Nusantara. Historical sources, such as *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals), *Babad Tanah Djawi*, and *Babad Demak*, provide evidence of a network of scholars who collectively introduced Islam to Java, Melaka and Champa, including figures like Maulana Ishaq, Sunan Ampel, Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang (A. S. Ahmad, 2008, p. 74; Olthof, 1941, p. 21; Hutomo, 1984, pp. 96–99). These sources demonstrate that the relationship between the three regions were not only political and economic but also significantly religious.

Based on the literature review above, it can be concluded that the expansion of Islam in Nusantara during the 15<sup>th</sup> century was greatly influenced by the interactions and collaborations between scholars from Java, Melaka and Champa. Java's role as a centre for Islamic dissemination through education provided by the *Walisongo*, Melaka's strategic role as a

trading and Islamic propagation hub, and Champa as the origin of some of the region's key Islamic scholars, are central themes in the literature. However, there is still room for further research that should explore the intellectual and spiritual interactions between these three regions more thoroughly, as well as how their peaceful approach to propagating Islam can be applied in contemporary contexts.

Interactions between scholars from Java, Melaka and Champa were not one-way initiatives but reciprocal in nature. Scholars from Java who studied in Melaka and Champa returned to Java and applied the knowledge they gained to their Islamic missionary work. Similarly, scholars from Melaka and Champa learned from the Islamic missionary approach developed by the *Walisongo* in Java. This exchange not only involved religious teachings but also included social and political strategies that allowed Islam to expand peacefully in new regions (Agus Sunyoto, 2019, p. 123).

## METODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine the interactions between Islamic scholars from Java (Indonesia), Melaka (Malaysia) and Champa (Vietnam) during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing on their roles in propagating Islam across Southeast Asia. The methodology employed was historical research (Abdurrahman, 1999, p. 33), which involved systematically and scientifically organizing and analysing previous events. Historical research follows four key stages, namely gathering sources (Thomas Gilovich, 2002, p. 3), selecting data (Helius Sjamsuddin, 2007, p. 102), interpreting data, and writing the historical narrative. This method also entails adhering to specific principles ascribed to historical research (Abdillah, 2012, p. 29). Primary sources for this study included relevant secondary sources such as *Babad Tanah Djawi*, *Babad Demak Pesisiran*, *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals), and historical reports on the Kingdom of Demak Bintara, Melaka, and Champa.

## Findings and Discussion

Melaka became a centre for trade and a meeting point for people from various parts of the world. Among the global trading networks thriving in the Port of Melaka were Muslim merchants from Pasai and Gujarat. While they came primarily for trade, these Muslim merchants also introduced Islam to the people of Melaka. However, Melaka was not alone in propagating Islam across Nusantara (Abdul Latif Abu Bakar, 1984, p. 28). The scholars and rulers of the Sultanate of Demak Bintara in Java also played an essential role in the propagation of Islam in the archipelago. The cooperation between the Sultanates of Melaka and Demak Bintara was key to the expansion of Islam in the region. Melaka introduced Islam to travellers and visitors in its port city, while Java further expanded Islamic teachings to the eastern regions of the archipelago, such as Banjar, Maluku and Nusa Tenggara (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 86).

During the Sultanate of Demak Bintara's reign, Islam rapidly expanded in Nusantara. The kingdom comprised a vast territory, encompassing the entire northern coast of Java, and its influence extended to Sumatra (Palembang and Jambi), Kalimantan (Banjar), and the Maluku Islands (Ternate and Tidore). Demak Bintara became both an Islamic centre and fortress in both the western and eastern parts of Nusantara. Demak also maintained its leadership over the

coastal kingdoms of Java as part of its strategy to consolidate its power on the island (Maulia et al., 2022, p. 77).

The Sultanate of Demak Bintara was not only a centre of political and economic power but also played a crucial role in the process of Islamization in Nusantara. Initially, the expansion of Islam in the region involved the establishment of social and cultural influence (Mahamid, 2023). This process unfolded alongside internal political dynamics in Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Maluku. The rise of Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago led to the integration of Islamic values into the social, cultural and political systems of Nusantara (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 86).

Moreover, Javanese kings, in particular, received strong support from Islamic scholars or the council of *wali* (saints). These scholars made significant contributions toward consolidating the political authority of rulers and advancing Islamization efforts (Denys Lombard, 2005, p. 54). Therefore, the scholar's role was pivotal in driving political change and development across the region. They held key positions not only in religious matters but also in socio-political and cultural affairs (Fahmi, 2022, p. 834). The political dynamics of Islamic kingdoms in Nusantara always involved the participation of religious scholars (Maryam, 2016, p. 67). The following discussion examines the interactions between Islamic scholars from Java, Melaka, and Champa, particularly in relation to the expansion of Islam throughout Nusantara.

### **Melaka: A Centre for the Expansion of Islam**

Melaka had emerged as one of the most important port cities in Nusantara during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, serving as a major meeting point for sailors from various regions around the world (*The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, completed about the year 1518, Vol II., p. 67). This port city was not only a trading hub but also a place where diverse cultures and religious teachings, particularly Islam, were introduced and propagated (Agus Sunyoto, 2019, p. 123). Melaka's success as a centre for the dissemination of Islam in Southeast Asia was largely due to the role of its rulers, especially Sultan Mansur Shah (1456–1477), who actively promoted the expansion of Islam in the region (A. S. Ahmad, 2008, p. 157).

Islam was introduced to sailors and merchants stopping by the port city through interactions with Muslim traders from Arabia, India and Persia who conducted business in Melaka (Wijaya, 2022, p. 4; Agus Sunyoto, 2019, p. 135). These relationships made Melaka more than just a trading hub; it also became a facilitator for the conversion of communities in Southeast Asia through a peaceful strategy, namely trade networks (A. S. Ahmad, 2008, p. 61). The presence of Islamic scholars and Islamic study enthusiasts who visited and settled in Melaka further consolidated the city's role as a centre for Islamic expansion (Laffan, 2011, p. 89).

One key example of Melaka's significance is noted in *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals), which tells the story of Maulana Abu Ishak, a scholar from Jeddah in Arabia, who sent his student, Maulana Abu Bakar, to propagate Islam in Melaka (A. S. Ahmad, 2008, p. 74). Maulana Abu Bakar was warmly received by Sultan Mansur Shah, who instructed the royal family and palace scholars to learn Islam from him. This relationship illustrates that Islamic centres in the Arab region were aware of Melaka's prominence in Islamic development and thus, maintained good relationships with the port city (Agus Sunyoto, 2019, p. 138).

However, Melaka's role as a centre for Islamic expansion eventually attracted the attention of European powers, particularly the Portuguese. In 1511, the Portuguese attacked and captured Melaka as part of their broader policy to undermine Muslim dominance in the spice trade to Europe (A. S. Ahmad, 2008, p. 157). This policy was based on a mandate from the Papal Bull of 1493 (*Inter Caetera*) and was further supported by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 (Andaya, 2015, p. 72). The colonization of Melaka had a significant impact on the Islamic civilization there, due to the destruction of many historical buildings and tombs of Muslim rulers (Wijaya, 2022, p. 3).

Despite this, Melaka's legacy as a centre for Islamic expansion in Nusantara remains well-recorded in history. This is acknowledged by various sources, including the writings of Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese explorer. Barbosa noted that Melaka was not only a major trading port but also a centre for Muslim scholars who propagated Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago, transforming the beliefs of millions of people in Southeast Asia (*The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, completed about the year 1518, Vol II., p. 199) (Andaya, 2015, p. 72).

### **Java: A Centre for Islamic Education**

Java had become a significant centre for Islamic education in Nusantara during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, while Melaka was recognized as a trading hub that contributed towards Islamic expansion. While Melaka was known as a meeting place for people of various ethnicities, including Arabs, and a centre for Islamic dissemination, Java became widely known as a primary destination for learning Islamic knowledge. Besides people from various islands in Nusantara, individuals from the Arab lands also came to Java to study under the *wali* (Islamic scholars), who were renowned for their wisdom and understanding of Islam (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 10).

One story that highlights Java's role as a centre for Islamic education is the arrival of three men from Yemen at the *Pesantren* Ampeldenta (Islamic boarding school), located in present-day Surabaya, Indonesia. These men, namely Sayid Muhsin, Sayid Ahmad, and Khalifah Husain, came with the aim of meeting Sunan Ampel, also known as Sayid Rahmat, to study Islamic law (*Shari'a*), mystical teaching and spiritual practices in Sufism (*tariqa*), and the ultimate truth (*haqiqa*) in Islam. Sunan Ampel welcomed them and after inquiring about their origins and purpose, began to teach them religious knowledge (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 25; Romdhoni, 2021, p. 86).

During the late Majapahit era, the *Pesantren* Ampeldenta became a centre for Islamic studies that attracted students from various islands in Nusantara. Some of Sunan Ampel's notable students included Raden Paku, Sayid Qasim, Sayid Abdul Jalil, Sayid Amir Husain, Sayid Amir al-Haj, Raden Sa'id, Amir Hamzah, Raden Fatah, and Raden Husain, all of whom studied various branches of Islamic knowledge at *Pesantren* Ampeldenta, from *Shari'a* to *tariqa* and *haqiqa* (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 27).

Another key figure who demonstrated Java's influence as an educational centre was Sultan Zainal Abidin of Ternate (1486–1500), who studied Islam under Sunan Giri at the *Pesantren* Giri in Java. Upon returning to the Maluku Islands, Zainal Abidin brought with him an Islamic missionary named Tuhubahalul, who contributed to the expansion of Islam in Maluku (Irnawati Gani Arif, 2017, p. 5). This underscores the major role played by Javanese

*wali* in propagating and expanding Islam across the region, including Maluku, by educating local leaders during the Demak Sultanate period.

The Demak Sultanate itself emerged from the Islamic education provided by Sunan Ampel at *Pesantren* Ampeldenta (present-day Surabaya, Indonesia). This sultanate played a pivotal role in the Islamization of Nusantara, particularly in regions such as Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Maluku. All members of the *Walisongo* (Nine Saints), including Raden Fatah, the first ruler of the Demak Sultanate, were either direct disciples or students of Sunan Ampel's disciples (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 27). Under the guidance of these *wali*, Raden Fatah governed his kingdom based on Islamic values (Hendro et al., 2021; Hasyim, 2021).

The Sultans of Demak played a significant role in countering the influence of the Portuguese, who sought to dominate trade and propagate Christianity in Nusantara, particularly after Melaka fell to the Portuguese in 1511. Demak then took over Banten Girang in order to control the Sunda Straits, the gateway to South Asian trade, in an effort to establish a new global trading hub in the Sunda Straits (Hendro et al., 2021; Hasyim, 2021).

The Demak Sultanate's success in preserving and propagating Islamic values throughout Nusantara, especially in Java, became a key factor in making Islam the dominant religion in present-day Indonesia and Malaysia. Although Nusantara was under foreign rule for over two centuries, the Islamic values taught by the *wali* in Java remained strong and formed the foundation of local social life, blending with Javanese wisdom.

Islamic education and community empowerment in the Ampelgading region had long been established through religious institutions. Sunan Ampel trained his students, mainly comprising students from Majapahit, Demak Bintara royalty, palace kin, Sunan Ampel's relatives, foreign visitors, and commoners alike, to become future leaders.

In addition to propagating Islam in Java, the Demak Sultanate and *Walisongo* significantly contributed to Islamic missionary efforts in kingdoms outside Java, such as the Sultanate of Banjar, Sultanate of Ternate and the Sultanate of Hitu in the Maluku Islands. For example, Sultan Zainal Abidin of Ternate (1486–1500) studied Islam in Java under Sunan Giri (Prabu Satmata) (Irnawati Gani Arif, 2017, p. 5; Alwi, 1996). In Java, Zainal Abidin was known as Raja Bulawa, or the Clove King, as he brought cloves from Maluku as a gift. After his studies in Java, Zainal Abidin invited an Islamic scholar named Tuhubahalul to teach and propagate Islamic values in Maluku. Prime Minister Jamilu from Hitu was the one who facilitated Zainal Abidin's journey to Giri. The relationship between Ternate, Hitu and Giri in Java was formidable at that time (Irnawati Gani Arif, 2017, p. 5). Sunan Ampel's *pesantren* ultimately became a centre of education for future leaders in Nusantara, which contributed to the development of a new Muslim society. Sunan Ampel's students later agreed to appoint Raden Fatah as the leader and imam for the Muslim community.

### Sunan Ampel's Student Register

No.	Name	Origin
1	Raden Paku (Sunan Giri), Maulana Ishaq's son	Jawa
2	Sayid Qasim (Sunan Derajat)	Jawa

3	Sayid Abdul Jalil (Syeh Siti Jenar)	Jawa
4	Sayid Amir Husain, Haji Usman's son, who was Sayid Rajapandita's son	Jawa
5	Sayid Amir al-Haj or Jakfar Shodiq (Sunan Kudus)	Jawa
6	Raden Sa'id (Sunan Muria)	Jawa
7	Amir Hamzah, Sayid Muhsin's son	Jawa
8	Raden Fatah	Palembang
9	Sayid Muhsin	Yaman
10	Sayid Ahmad	Yaman
11	Khalifah Husain	Yaman

Source: Abu al-Fadhal, *Ahla al-Musamarah* (1420)

### Interactions Between Ulama in Nusantara

Historical research has uncovered evidence indicating that many Islamic scholars (*ulama*) resided in Melaka, attracting other religious scholars and Islamic study enthusiasts from across Nusantara, including notable figures such as Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri. Sultan Mahmud Syah (1488-1511) personally witnessed the arrival of Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri in Melaka, recognizing them as famous *wali* (saints) from Java (Winstedt, 2018, p. 78; Fikri, 2011, p. 40). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, people from Nusantara often chose to study Islam in Melaka rather than Samudera Pasai, perhaps due to its proximity. Melaka at that time was described as a true "Mecca" for learning, since not only scholars but also sultans visited Melaka to study Islam. Sultan Abidin of the Ternate Sultanate, after completing his studies at the *Pesantren* Giri, also visited Melaka during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah (1477-1488) (Yusuf, 2006, p. 105; Fikri, 2011, p. 41).

Javanese historiography also depicts interactions between prominent figures from the Demak Sultanate in Java and religious scholars in Melaka. One significant figure who had close ties with the *Walisongo* in Java was Maulana Ishaq, who is said to have lived in Melaka. Maulana Ishaq, the father of Sunan Giri, was the uncle of Raden Rahmat (Sunan Ampel) from Champa. There are several possibilities that explain his presence in Melaka. First, Maulana Ishaq may have been one of the *ulama* who settled in Melaka, which had become a hub for Islamic development in Southeast Asia at that time. He likely became a part of the community of scholars in Melaka who had arrived from other Islamic centres, such as Mecca. Alternatively, he may have resided in Melaka temporarily before returning to Java, where he eventually passed away (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 155).

It is said that Raden Paku, the son of Maulana Ishaq (later known as Sunan Giri), and Raden Ibrahim, the son of Sunan Ampel (later known as Sunan Bonang), had planned to travel to Mecca to study Islam. Their journey from Ampel (now in Surabaya, Indonesia) to Mecca included a stopover in Melaka, where they intended to visit Maulana Ishaq, who was Raden Paku's father and Raden Ibrahim's uncle, living there at the time. Raden Paku and Raden



Ibrahim stayed in Melaka for a year, studying Islam under Maulana Ishaq. When the time came to continue their journey to Mecca, Maulana Ishaq discouraged them from doing so. Instead, he advised his son and nephew to return to Java and diligently study under Sayid Rahmat at the *Pesantren Ampeldenta* (Al-Fadhal, 1994, p. 22).

This story provides evidence of interactions between Javanese *ulama* and those in Melaka and Champa. Javanese Islamic scholars had significant engagements in Melaka and often lived there for extended periods. Sunan Ampel became a reference for Islamic scholars and Muslim students from various regions, including those from outside Nusantara, such as the Arab world. This exchange of knowledge between Java and Melaka highlights the strong religious and scholarly connections that facilitated the expansion of Islam throughout Southeast Asia.

### Register of Ulama who Interacted in Melaka

No.	Name	Year	Origin
1	Qadhi Yusuf	(1456-1477) Sultan Mansur Syah	Melaka
2	Qadhi Munawar	(1456-1477) Sultan Mansur Syah	Melaka
3	Maulana Abu Ishak	(1456-1477) Sultan Mansur Syah	Jedah, Arab
4	Maulana Abu Bakar	(1456-1477) Sultan Mansur Syah	Jedah
5	Maulana Ishaq	(1488-1511) Sultan Mahmud Syah	Parsi; Jawa
6	Sunan Bonang	(1488-1511) Sultan Mahmud Syah	Jawa
7	Sunan Giri	(1488-1511) Sultan Mahmud Syah	Jawa

Source: *Sulalatus Salatin* (2008) and *Babad Tanah Jawi* (1987).

The interaction and cooperation between Islamic scholars in Nusantara, particularly in Java, Melaka and Champa, eventually gave rise to a significant Muslim community that endures to this day. Despite the dismantling of Islamic progress in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Melaka by the Portuguese colonists, an undeniable testament to its legacy is the fact that the majority of the region's population, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, are Muslim. This enduring Muslim presence reflects the development seen in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, where these regions were known for being home to a large and advanced Muslim society. Such continuity is undoubtedly linked to the historical events of the past.

## Characteristics of Islamic Expansion in Java, Melaka and Champa

The arrival of Islam in Java, Melaka and Champa is one of the key phenomena in Southeast Asia's Islamic history. Historical evidence shows that the Islamic expansion in these regions occurred peacefully, with strong interactions between the *ulama* (Islamic scholars). Islam first arrived in Java in the 15<sup>th</sup> century through interactions between scholars from Champa, Melaka and Java. One significant example is the connection between Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri with the Islamic scholars of Melaka (Olthof, 1941, p. 19).

Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri, both members of the *Walisongo*, had travelled to Melaka to study Islam. They were accompanied by Maulana Ishaq, Sunan Giri's father, who resided in Melaka. The two stayed in Melaka for a year before planning to continue their journey to Mecca. However, following Maulana Ishaq's advice, they returned to Java to continue their Islamic studies at the *Pesantren* Ampeldenta (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 155). By that time, Sunan Ampel's *pesantren* had already been established as a key destination for Islamic students. He was a charismatic figure and an Islamic scholar who welcomed all students eager to learn from him (Hutomo, 1984, p. 65).

Islam had already made its way to Java in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, before the establishment of the Demak Sultanate, by the wife of the Majapahit king at the time, Prabu Brawijaya. Brawijaya, also known as Raden Alit or Sri Kertawijaya, ruled from 1447 to 1451. He married a princess from the Champa kingdom, Dewi Dwarawati Martaningrum, who was also the aunt of Raden Rahmat, or Sunan Ampel (Olthof, 1941, p. 20; Romdhoni, 2021, p. 42). Thus, the expansion of Islam in Java involved in-depth Islamic learning and direct interaction with Islamic centres. All of this occurred in an atmosphere of mutual respect and peace.

Melaka became a major centre for the dissemination of Islam in Southeast Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, thus, attracting scholars and students from various regions, including Nusantara. Melaka was described as a city comparable to Mecca during that period (Fikri, 2011, p. 25). Scholars from various places, such as Jeddah, Arabia and Champa travelled to Melaka to propagate as well as study Islamic knowledge, making it an Islamic learning hub. Sultan Mahmud Syah witnessed the presence of scholars such as Maulana Ishaq, Sunan Bonang, and Sunan Giri, highlighting the city's significance as a centre for Islamic education (Sulalatus Salatin, 2008).

According to the *Babad Tanah Djawi*, Islam was introduced to Champa by Ibrahim al-Samarqandi, who later married Princess Candrawulan, the daughter of the King of Champa (Olthof, 1941, p. 18). This account is consistent with records from *Babad Demak* (Hutomo, 1984, pp. 96-99). Maulana Ishaq was one of the influential scholars in Melaka, residing there for a considerable time before returning to Java (Romdhoni, 2021, p. 155). His presence in Melaka exemplifies the strong network of scholars emerging from Champa, Melaka, and Java. Islam expanded peacefully in these regions through the interaction and collaboration of scholars from Java, Melaka and Champa. This process involved education and direct interpersonal exchanges between scholars from various areas, creating a robust network for the dissemination of Islam. Although Melaka was later destroyed by the Portuguese, and the Islamic legacy in Champa (modern-day Vietnam and Cambodia) faded due to socio-political changes, Islam remains the dominant religion in Nusantara to this day.

## Cultural Interaction in Java, the Malay Archipelago and Campa

Islamic interactions in Java, Melaka and Champa also fostered a rich cultural exchange, blending Islamic values with local traditions in these regions. These exchanges laid the foundation for the development of a unique Southeast Asian Muslim identity that continues to influence the cultural and religious practices in the region today.

Gerke Solvey (2002) noted that the Strait of Melaka is much more than just a sea route connecting ships carrying goods from East to West, and *vice versa*. It also serves as a crossroads for knowledge, culture and communities. In the Malay region, the strait links Sumatra, Riau Islands and the Thai Malaysian Peninsula into a single cultural and ethnic region. It also connects various kingdoms separated by the strait, thus, creating networks of trade and religion (Gerke & Evers, 2011, p. 8).

Knowledge and culture from surrounding regions met and influenced one another through the transportation channel attributed to the Strait of Melaka. The Port of Melaka not only facilitated exchanges between local cultures and knowledge around the strait, but it also connected Nusantara with cultures from all over the world.

During the colonial era, beginning in 1511, such connections diminished somewhat but persisted. By the 1980s, with the emergence of coastal nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the region's economic growth and development started to flourish more robustly. At the same time, the Strait of Melaka maintained and even strengthened its position as the world's most important maritime route, surpassing the Panama Canal or the Strait of Gibraltar that separates Africa from Europe (R. Syeh Adni, 2019).

There is an old mosque with a distinct architectural design in the city of Melaka. Upon closer observation, the Masjid Kampung Hulu's structure resembles the architecture of Javanese mosques. Nor Adina Abdul Kadir (2019), in her literary work, *"The Oldest Mosques in Malacca: History and Main Components of Mosques"*, explored the influence of Chinese culture on the architectural design of old mosques in Melaka, such as Masjid Kampung Hulu, Masjid Kampung Keling, and Masjid Tengker. The study revealed that, in addition to Malay and Islamic cultural elements, these mosques also incorporated Chinese cultural features. The mosque's towers and roofs, with their wavy decorations, resemble Chinese pagodas, though the overall structure remains rooted in Malay architectural design. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, traders from Java, Arabia, India, Europe and China came to Melaka and settled there. Their presence created a blend of cultures that influenced the design and style of the local mosques. The Chinese architectural influence on Melaka's mosques began when skilled Chinese workers first arrived to help construct these buildings (Jaafar et al., 2023).



Photo 1: Masjid Kampung Hulu with a three-tiered mosque roof like the architectural design of old mosques in Java, Indonesia.

Source: Ali Romdhoni, 15 February 2023

According to the author, Melaka's old mosques, as previously mentioned, were not only influenced by Chinese culture. The architectural design of mosques with three-tiered roofs is commonly seen in Javanese mosques. The Javanese people have their own philosophical understanding of these three-tiered roofs, which symbolize the teachings of *iman* (faith), *Islam*, and *ihsan* (virtue).

This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Anisah Bahyah Ahmad and Wan Kamal Mujani (2015) in their study, "Interior Motifs and Designs of The Malacca Mosque: A Discussion on the Kampung Kling Mosque". Foreign traders from China, India, and Java who arrived in Melaka in the 15<sup>th</sup> century had brought along their cultural traditions with them. This significantly influenced the architecture and decorative motifs of Melaka's mosques, which adopted what is known as the Sino-Eclectic design. The term "Sino" refers to the Chinese influence, while "Eclectic" represents a combination of two or more architectural influences.

Based on research conducted on the Sino-Eclectic Kampung Kling Mosque in Melaka, the interior motifs and design of this mosque reflect artistic and aesthetic values brought by the Chinese, Indian and Javanese (Indonesian). The cultural influences from outside the Malay region are evident in the visual motifs and designs that adorn the mosque, demonstrating substantial impact from these three main cultures. One clear example of Javanese artistic influence in the Kampung Kling Mosque is the *Awan Larat* motif on the mosque's pillars. The *Awan Larat* motif is characterized using flowers, broad leaves, branches, and small fruits. The fruits in the *Awan Larat* motif are smaller than those found in other patterns and are intricately interwoven. The motif, also known as the "spreading cloud" motif, features intricate carvings with a circular and expanding effect, consisting of large and rare flowers with numerous branches, leaves, and stems.

The Kampung Kling Mosque also has three roofs, with its interior rich in symbols and visual motifs comprising elements of flora, fauna, geometry, the cosmos, and calligraphy. These decorative features are highlighted to enhance the mosque's aesthetic value and uniqueness. The use of such motifs and images is allowed if it does not violate the principles of *Shariah* (Islamic

law), thus, making Islamic teachings more readily accepted in Malay society (A. B. Ahmad & Motifs, n.d.).



Photo 2: Pillars of Kampung Keling Mosque in Melaka City, Malaysia with Javanese cloud motifs.

Source: Anisah Bahyah Ahmad (2015)

The combination of motifs and ornaments incorporated into the Kampung Keling Mosque building creates a distinct sense of beauty and uniqueness. The blend of decorations from various cultures makes the mosque's interior more vibrant. The multicultural carvings in the mosque display the creativity of the craftsmen who worked on the mosque's interior design at the time. These artisans successfully merged local elements with foreign cultural elements in beautiful harmony. They produced a mosque design characterized by purity and high aesthetic values, which aligned with Islamic principles and were readily accepted by the Malay community in Kampung Keling Mosque. The Kampung Keling Mosque, one of the oldest centres of Islamic worship in Melaka, is strategically located, making it easy for many Muslim traders visiting Melaka to stop by and perform their religious obligations.

Traces of interaction between Javanese and Malay knowledge and culture in the 15<sup>th</sup> century can also be found in the heritage literature circulating in Nusantara, which used Arabic script but was written in the Malay language mode, also known as "Arab-Malay" or "*Jawi Arabic*" (also called "Pegon Arabic"). The Jawi script was an experimental creation by the Nusantara people aimed at documenting Islamic civilization in the distinctive literary tradition of the Malays in Nusantara. Jawi script has been used by Muslim communities across Nusantara, including Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Java, for more than 600 years, becoming a unique identity. According to Kun Zachrun Istanti (2010), the expansion of Islam in the Malay world was accompanied by the introduction of the Arabic language and a literacy culture (reading and writing). (Istanti, 2010, p. 242). To this day, Javanese and Malay communities use a language rich in Arabic terms. These terms have become an integral part of the Malay and Javanese languages and have developed into mediums of knowledge in society.



This shows that the Islamic influence of Demak Bintara and Melaka remains evident until today.

The interaction and influence of the Malay and Javanese cultures during the Melaka and Demak Bintara Sultanate eras extended to fashion, and a shared love for dancing and singing. According to the testimony by Pires, both Javanese and Malay men and women displayed similarities (Cortese, 2011, p. 177). In addition, a cultural blend occurred in the literary writing traditions. Malay literary works, such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, share similarities with Javanese literary works like *Cerita Panji*. (Winstedt, 2018, p. 62) (Fikri, 2011, p. 40).



Photo 3: Campa Site in Phan Rang, Central Vietnam, the materials and arrangement of the bricks have similarities with the Kudus Tower in Kudus, Indonesia.

Photo: Ali Romdhoni, 17 January 2023.

The relationship between Java and Champa has existed since the Majapahit era (Ricklefs, 2001, p. 21). Champa's cultural influence on Java is evident in various aspects of Javanese culture, although it is not always easy to distinguish these influences. Champa's impact on Javanese art and architecture can be seen in the use of certain motifs and designs. While direct influence is not always easily identifiable, there is a possibility that some design elements from Champa, known for its Hindu-Buddhist architecture, may have influenced early architectural designs in Java. However, this influence is more apparent in the context of Hindu-Buddhist architecture before the arrival of Islam. Some elements of Champa's performing arts also influenced Javanese performing arts. Although there is no clear documentation of direct influence, the cultural exchanges during that period likely included aspects of performing arts. Champa's influence is also seen in Javanese crafts and visual arts. For example, Champa's techniques in ceramics and sculpture may have influenced Javanese craftsmanship (Anne-Valérie Schweyer, 2011).

Based on the discussion above, it is apparent that the Javanese, Malay and Champa peoples had social and cultural ties. People from Java, Melaka and Champa interacted with each other, both individually and in groups, which led to information exchange that fostered learning and mutual influence. This exchange and mutual influence shaped various aspects of culture and knowledge among the nations in Nusantara.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the interactions between scholars from Java (Indonesia), Melaka (Malaysia), and Champa (Vietnam) during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing on their role in propagating Islam across Southeast Asia. Based on the data presented, one of the key findings of this study is the collaboration and exchange between scholars from these three crucial regions (Java, Melaka and Champa), which significantly contributed to the expansion of Islam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This study emphasised that the close connections and knowledge exchange among scholars in these areas were instrumental in consolidating and expanding the influence of Islam in Nusantara, and Southeast Asia as a whole.

Another important finding lies in the analysis of peaceful strategies employed by these scholars in propagating Islam in Java, Melaka and Champa. Results show that peaceful approaches were practiced by kingdoms and sultanates, not only when disseminating the religion but also in strengthening social, political, and economic networks across Southeast Asian regions.

Therefore, this study provides new insight into the role of Melaka as a facilitator of religious transformation in Southeast Asia; demonstrating how this port city was not only a trading hub but also a key node in the network of Islamic propagation in the region. Thus, a significant contribution of this study is its interdisciplinary approach that combined historical, social, political and economic perspectives to examine interactions among scholars and the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia during the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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