

The Historical Development of Islam and Converts in Sabah, Malaysia: From the 14th Century to the Official Designation of Islam as the State Religion

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Abstract

This article examines the historical trajectory of Islam in Sabah, Malaysia from the 14th century to its official proclamation as the state religion in 1973, analyzing the key factors that facilitated the Islamization process alongside the challenges encountered. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study utilizes historical analysis and secondary sources, including manuscripts, colonial records, and prior scholarly works on the spread of Islam in Sabah. The findings reveal that Islam's dissemination was primarily driven by maritime trade, diplomatic engagements with the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu, and the role of converts (*mualaf*) as intermediaries between Islam and indigenous communities. However, during the British colonial period, Islamic expansion faced significant impediments due to policies favoring Christianization, restrictions on Islamic missionary activities, and the expulsion of Muslim preachers. Following independence, the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha and the establishment of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) played a pivotal role in consolidating Islamic influence, resulting in an increase in the Muslim population from 38% in 1960 to 51% in 1980. The official designation of Islam as the state religion in 1973 further institutionalized Islamic governance through entities such as the Sabah Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) and the Syariah Court. This study concludes that structured *da'wah* strategies, effective political leadership, and institutional development were instrumental in ensuring the sustained presence and expansion of Islam in Sabah. By contributing to the historiography of Islam in Malaysia, this article also offers valuable insights into *da'wah* efforts and the socio-religious identity formation of Sabah's Muslim community.

Keywords: Islam In Sabah, *Mualaf*, British Colonialism, Islamization, Tun Datu Mustapha

Introduction

Sabah, located in northern Borneo, shares borders with Sarawak to the southwest and Kalimantan, Indonesia, to the south, while being surrounded by the Sulu and South China Seas. Its strategic location has long made it a center for trade and cultural exchange, facilitating interactions between various civilizations. Among these influences was the arrival and expansion of Islam, which became an integral part of Sabah's religious and cultural landscape. Kota Kinabalu, as the state capital, plays a vital role in Sabah's economic, social, and religious development, further reinforcing the state's position as a historical trade hub that contributed to the spread of Islam (Rusli et al., 2023).

The development of Islam in Sabah dates back to the 14th century, driven by trade, diplomatic ties, and the migration of Muslim traders from Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao. Before Islam, indigenous communities practiced animistic beliefs that shaped their cultural and social values (Hajimin et al., 2021). Islam gradually spread through commercial interactions, intermarriage, and the efforts of *mualaf*, who played a key role in integrating Islamic teachings with local traditions. These factors contributed significantly to the acceptance of Islam, establishing it as part of Sabah's evolving cultural and religious identity (Rasip, 2024).

Despite its growth, Islamization in Sabah was not without challenges. During the British colonial period, policies largely favored Christianity, restricting Islamic educational institutions and expelling Muslim missionaries such as Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub (Sintang et al., 2019). The "Concentration of Mohammedan Community" policy further limited Islamic propagation. However, Muslim preachers and *mualaf* remained resilient, ensuring the continuity of *da'wah* through the establishment of *madrasah*, religious institutions, and informal education within Muslim communities.

After independence, Islam's development became more structured under the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha, who played a pivotal role in strengthening its position. The establishment of USIA in 1969 marked a turning point, with initiatives such as mosque construction, Islamic education expansion, and *mualaf* support programs. These efforts contributed to the Muslim population increasing from 38% in 1960 to 51% in 1980 (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020). This growth highlights the effectiveness of systematic *da'wah* strategies in Sabah's religious transformation.

The official proclamation of Islam as the state religion in 1973 was a milestone that institutionalized its role in governance while preserving religious freedom for non-Muslim communities (The Constitution of the State of Sabah, 2019). Institutions such as MUIS, the Syariah Court, and *zakat* organizations were established to support the Islamic framework. This study examines the development of Islam in Sabah from the 14th century to 1973, analyzing the factors that contributed to its acceptance, the challenges faced, and the post-independence strategies that consolidated its presence. Understanding this historical progression provides deeper insights into the socio-religious transformation of Sabah's Muslim community.

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Seas. Its strategic location has long made it a center for trade and cultural exchange, facilitating interactions between various civilizations. One of the most significant outcomes of these exchanges was the arrival and expansion of Islam, which became an integral part of Sabah's religious and cultural landscape. The spread of Islam in Sabah is not merely a historical phenomenon but a crucial aspect of understanding the state's socio-religious development. Analyzing its historical trajectory provides valuable insights into how religious transformation influences social structures, governance, and cultural identity.

The study of Islamization in Sabah is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on the mechanisms through which Islam was introduced, adapted, and institutionalized in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Understanding this process is significant in appreciating the role of Islam in shaping Sabah's identity. Secondly, examining the factors that facilitated and hindered the spread of Islam provides a broader perspective on the dynamics of religious conversion and integration, which can inform contemporary discussions on religious harmony and multiculturalism. Additionally, this study is crucial for policymakers, educators, and scholars engaged in the fields of Islamic studies, history, and social sciences, as it provides empirical data that can be utilized in educational curricula and policy formulation.

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Following independence, Islam's development became more structured under the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha, who played a pivotal role in strengthening its position. The establishment of USIA in 1969 marked a turning point, with initiatives such as mosque construction, Islamic education expansion, and mualaf support programs. These efforts contributed to the Muslim population increasing from 38% in 1960 to 51% in 1980 (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020). This growth highlights the effectiveness of systematic da'wah strategies in Sabah's religious transformation.

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independence strategies that consolidated its presence. By exploring this topic, this study contributes to a broader understanding of religious transformation in Sabah and its implications for contemporary Islamic governance, interfaith relations, and community development.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. **To analyze the factors contributing to the spread of Islam in Sabah.** This study examines the role of trade, diplomatic relations with the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu, and the contributions of *mualaf* in accelerating the acceptance of Islam among the indigenous communities of Sabah from the 14th century until the pre-colonial era.
2. **To assess the challenges to the development of Islam in Sabah during British colonial Rule.** This research analyzes colonial policies that hindered Islamic *da'wah*, restrictions imposed on Islamic educational institutions, and the strategies employed by Islamic preachers and the Muslim community to sustain Islam throughout the colonial period.
3. **To examine the role of leadership and Islamic institutions in strengthening Islam in post-independence Sabah.** This study explores the contributions of Tun Datu Mustapha and the establishment of USIA in empowering Islamic institutions, increasing the Muslim population, and facilitating the designation of Islam as the state religion of Sabah in 1973.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes historical and document analysis to examine the development of Islam and the role of *mualaf* in Sabah from the 14th century to its proclamation as the state religion in 1973. Primary sources include historical manuscripts, government documents, colonial reports, and academic studies on Islam's spread and Christian missionary influence. Secondary data, such as population censuses and USIA records, are analyzed to understand religious demographic shifts. Thematic analysis is applied to explore factors driving Islamization, *da'wah* challenges under British rule, and post-independence leadership in strengthening Islam. Additionally, content analysis of historical texts on the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates, British policies, and post-integration religious policies is conducted. A comparative analysis of Islamic and Christian *da'wah* strategies helps identify religious expansion patterns and their socio-religious impact, offering a holistic understanding of Sabah's Islamization and the role of *mualaf*.

Literature Review

Islam has developed harmoniously within Sabah's society through *da'wah* approaches that respect traditional norms and values. The study by Mulyadi, Moh Dede, & Widiawaty, (2022) highlights how traditional beliefs and local wisdom have shaped Sabah's social system, indirectly facilitating the acceptance of Islam. The integration of Islamic teachings with indigenous culture allowed Islam to spread without triggering significant social conflicts. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the role of *mualaf* as intermediaries in the Islamization process in Sabah, particularly in disseminating Islamic teachings among non-Muslim communities.

Rasip et al. (2025) explore the historical development of Islam in Sabah from the 14th century to independence in 1963, emphasizing key factors that shaped its Islamization. Maritime trade facilitated the introduction of Islam, while the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates

reinforced its influence. *Mualaf* played a central role in *da'wah*, alongside Arab and Chinese Muslim traders who were instrumental in propagating Islam. Despite British colonial policies favoring Christian missionary efforts, Islamic institutions, local *ulama*, and the resilience of *mualaf* ensured the continuity of Islamic teachings. This study offers valuable insights into Sabah's Islamic heritage and serves as a reference for developing more inclusive and effective *da'wah* strategies in multicultural societies.

In the colonial context, Yaacob (2021) investigates Orientalism and the challenges faced in the development of Islam in Sabah under British colonial policies. He emphasizes how British policies, such as restrictions on Muslim migration to non-Muslim areas and the expulsion of Islamic preachers, including Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub, hindered the expansion of Islam. The colonial administration also reinforced Christian dominance by supporting missionary-led churches, schools, and hospitals. While this study provides an in-depth perspective on the obstacles faced by Sabah's Muslim community, it offers limited discussion on how *mualaf* contributed to preserving Islamic identity amid colonial pressures.

According to Aliakbar & Rasip (2024), *mualaf*—individuals transitioning from a non-Muslim background to Islam—encounter significant personal and societal challenges. This qualitative study, based on a literature review, identifies key difficulties in Malaysia, including complex conversion procedures, emotional distress, adaptation struggles, family rejection, societal stigma, financial instability, limited religious knowledge, restricted access to Islamic education, and a shortage of local religious instructors. The study underscores the need for greater awareness among Muslims to ensure comprehensive support for *mualaf*, facilitating their integration. These findings serve as a reference for Muslim communities and *da'wah* organizations to develop systematic assistance strategies. However, the study broadly examines challenges in Malaysia without addressing the specific context of Sabah.

The study by Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin (2020) provides a detailed account of *da'wah* developments in Sabah following the establishment of USIA, including efforts to bring in Islamic preachers from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Arab countries to spread Islam among non-Muslim communities. It also highlights how USIA's *da'wah* strategies successfully attracted many non-Muslims to Islam, including Kadazandusun leaders such as Tun Fuad Stephens, who embraced Islam in 1971. This significant shift in Sabah's religious demographics ultimately led to the official proclamation of Islam as the state religion in 1973, further consolidating Islamic administrative structures in the state.

Studies on the Rungus community in northern Sabah, traditionally examined through anthropological and historical perspectives, also explore the phased Islamization process initiated in the 1970s by USIA's *da'wah* efforts. According to Khalli, Sintang, & Ationg (2023), Islam initially spread through individual conversions before religious institutions like mosques and madrasahs facilitated Muslim guidance. *Da'wah* institutions played a key role in fostering adherence, while conversions among indigenous groups triggered social, economic, and educational changes. Research in Matunggong highlights the emergence of a new religious identity, underscoring the need for further study on its impact on Muslim minorities in Sabah's interior. Nevertheless, this study is confined to the Rungus community in Matunggong and does not extend its analysis to the broader experiences of Muslim converts across Sabah.

Research Findings

Indigenous Belief Heritage in Sabah Before the Arrival of Religion

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the indigenous communities of Sabah practiced animism as their primary belief system (Berinai, 2024). Animism attributed souls or spirits to natural elements such as trees, rivers, and mountains, which were believed to possess certain powers. This belief system shaped the interaction between society and its environment, where respect for nature was essential to avoiding misfortune and ensuring communal well-being. The harmony between humans and nature was considered fundamental, making animism not only a belief system but also a way of life that encompassed various cultural and social aspects of Sabah's indigenous communities (Mulyadi, Moh Dede & Widiawaty, 2022).

In daily life, animism influenced community traditions and rituals, particularly in significant events such as birth, marriage, and death. Ceremonies involving the worship of nature spirits were often performed to seek protection and blessings. Additionally, practices such as paying homage to the guardian spirits of the land before building houses or starting agricultural activities reflected their appreciation of ecological balance (Nasir, & Hasan, 2018). These beliefs also reinforced communal values, such as mutual respect and environmental sustainability, which were central to the social fabric of indigenous society. Animism not only shaped individual beliefs but also strengthened community bonds through collective rituals that fostered a sense of solidarity (Rahman, 2018).

Although the spread of Islam and Christianity brought significant changes to the belief structure of Sabah's society, the influence of animism remains evident today, particularly in cultural practices in rural areas. Elements such as customary traditions and specific rituals continue to be practiced as part of ancestral heritage, reflecting the deep-seated impact of animism in shaping the cultural identity of Sabah's communities. While these traditional beliefs are gradually fading, they continue to provide insights into the close relationship between society and nature, as well as the spiritual values passed down through generations (Berinai, 2024).

The Role of Traders in Islamic Proselytization in Sabah

Islam began to establish itself in Sabah around the 14th century through trade networks and *da'wah* activities introduced by merchants from the Nusantara region, including Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao (Rasip et al., 2025). Beyond their economic ventures, Muslim traders also propagated Islam through ethical values such as justice and brotherhood, which attracted the interest of local communities. Interactions in maritime trade provided an opportunity for traders to engage in indirect *da'wah*, facilitating the acceptance of Islam without coercion. The emphasis of Islam on morality and social ethics made its teachings more relatable to the everyday lives of the indigenous population (Sugandi & Romdhoni, 2023).

Apart from trade, intermarriage between Muslim traders and indigenous communities also played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Sabah (Adam, 2023). The familial ties established through marriage accelerated the acceptance of Islam within the community, as Islamic teachings were disseminated directly within the household. Marriages not only strengthened social relations between different cultural groups but also facilitated the integration of *tauhid* concepts and religious practices such as prayer and fasting into local daily life (Sintang et al., 2019). Furthermore, cultural assimilation through marriage

demonstrated how indigenous customs were harmonized with Islamic values without erasing the original identity of the local society.

The growing influence of Islam through trade and marriage led to significant transformations in the social structure of Sabah's communities. Practices such as *zakat*, halal slaughtering, and religious education gradually became embedded in daily life, shaping a distinctive socio-religious identity (Sudarman et al., 2021). The effectiveness of this *da'wah* approach highlights that Islam did not only spread through formal preaching and direct invitations but also through harmonious social interactions. According to Jominal (2020), marriage remains one of the primary factors driving conversions to Islam in Sabah, reflecting the high level of religious cohesion and tolerance within the community. Through a gradual and inclusive approach, Islam was not only embraced as a faith but also became an integral part of the social structure, fostering a harmonious coexistence in Sabah's multicultural society.

The Role of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates in the Spread of Islam

The early development of Islam in Sabah was significantly influenced by the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates. In the 15th century, the region was under the influence of the Brunei Sultanate, a maritime kingdom that had long embraced Islam and played a crucial role in its dissemination. The rulers of Brunei served as role models for the nobility in Sabah, who subsequently introduced Islam to the wider community. The close political and cultural ties between Brunei and Sabah accelerated the Islamization process, particularly in coastal areas that were more exposed to external influences (Sudarman et al., 2021). Beyond political relations, the spread of Islam was further strengthened through the establishment of religious institutions such as mosques and *madrasah*, which provided structured Islamic education (Mat Kib, 2003).

In the 17th century, the eastern region of Sabah was ceded to the Sulu Sultanate as a reward for military assistance provided to Brunei (Naureen, Nazar & Soomro, 2014). This division resulted in a split in political influence and Islamization efforts in Sabah, with Brunei controlling the western and northern parts, while Sulu governed the east. Although both sultanates employed different approaches in spreading Islam, their ultimate goal remained the same—to solidify Islam as the dominant religion. The legacy of this division continues to shape the social and religious structure of Sabah's communities, forming the foundation of an Islamic identity that has remained relevant despite the challenges of modernization (Rasip et al., 2025).

In addition to the sultanates, Muslim traders from the Arab world and China also played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam, primarily through trade interactions (Muhiddin, 1990). These merchants not only brought goods but also introduced Islamic values, which were gradually integrated into the daily lives of the local communities. Muslim preachers traveled into the interior regions, introducing Islam while respecting indigenous customs, making Islamic teachings more acceptable (Borham et al., 2021). The presence of Islam led to significant social changes, strengthening communal relationships through principles of justice and brotherhood. The mosques and *madrasah* established by the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates became the pillars of structured Islamic expansion. Although colonial rule later posed challenges to the Islamization process, the strong foundation laid by these sultanates ensured

that Islam continued to thrive and remained a central identity for Sabah's Muslim communities (Rasip, 2024).

The Role of Colonialism in the Spread of Christianity

In the early 19th century, the arrival of Christian missionaries in Sabah introduced new challenges to the expansion of Islam, particularly among indigenous communities. The British, who regarded Sabah as a strategic location in North Borneo, combined economic interests with their mission to propagate Christianity (Richard, 1999). Indigenous groups such as the Kadazandusun, who still adhered to animistic beliefs, became the primary target of Christian missionaries. The administrative center for Christian religious activities, previously located in Sarawak, was relocated to Labuan, marking the beginning of a systematic effort to spread Christianity among the local population.

The establishment of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) in 1881 further reinforced Christianization efforts. Beyond exploiting natural resources such as timber and marine products, the British colonial administration viewed Christianization as part of their broader initiative to introduce Western values to the indigenous population. The principle of "3G"—God, Gold, and Glory—served as the foundation for this mission. With full support from BNBCC, Christian missionaries were granted the freedom to operate, enabling them to establish schools and hospitals in strategic locations such as Kudat, Sandakan, and Tawau (Kamal & Resad, 2022).

Educational institutions and social services became the primary instruments for the spread of Christianity. Missionary schools played a crucial role in improving literacy rates among local communities while systematically introducing Christian teachings (Muhiddin, 1990). Additionally, mission-run hospitals provided healthcare services, enhancing the image of missionaries as protectors and benefactors of the indigenous people. Their efforts extended beyond education and healthcare to include agricultural training and economic development programs, which facilitated the assimilation of Christian teachings into the daily lives of the local population (Mat Kib, 2003).

The Anglican denomination was among the pioneers of this missionary movement, with Rev. Father Francis Thomas McDouglas appointed as Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak in 1855. Other denominations, such as Roman Catholicism, the Basel Christian Church, and the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), also played significant roles in consolidating Christianity's presence in Sabah (Yusoff, 1994). Coastal regions such as Sandakan and Kudat became early administrative centers before missionary activities expanded into the interior regions, including Keningau and Pensiangan. Advancements in technology further facilitated the spread of Christianity, particularly through the use of Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) aircraft to transport missionaries and supplies to remote areas (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

The spread of Christianity led to profound social and cultural transformations within Sabah's communities. Over four decades, the number of missionary schools increased significantly, producing a more educated and competitive generation (Yusoff, 2004). Churches such as St. James in Kudat and St. Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society in Sandakan became community hubs that functioned not only as places of worship but also as centers for education and social services (Muhiddin, 1990). Today, the legacy of Christian missionary

activities remains visible in the form of churches, schools, and social institutions that are integral to Sabah's cultural landscape. While Islam remains the dominant religion in Sabah, Christianity has contributed to the state's religious diversity, making it unique within Malaysia's broader socio-religious context (Rasip et al., 2025).

The Development of Islam and Its Challenges During the Colonial Era

During the colonial period, the development of Islam in Sabah faced numerous challenges that restricted its expansion, particularly when compared to Christian missionary efforts, which received full support from the British colonial administration. Islamic *da'wah* activities were primarily carried out by individuals or volunteer groups without financial assistance or robust infrastructure. As a result, the spread of Islam remained largely concentrated in coastal and interior areas where Muslim communities were already established. Meanwhile, the British placed significant emphasis on the development of Christian missions, which indirectly slowed the Islamization process in Sabah (Ramli, 1988). The religious demographic shifts in Sabah during the colonial era clearly illustrate the challenges faced by Islam in maintaining and expanding its presence.

No	Religion	1921	1931	1951	1960
1	Islam	81,886 (32%)	86,713 (32%)	115,126 (37%)	173,240 (38%)
2	Christianity	6,980 (3%)	10,454 (4%)	29,092 (9%)	75,247 (17%)
3	Buddhism, Hinduism, Others	33,513 (13%)	41,463 (15%)	33,513 (11%)	206,740 (46%)
4	No Religion/ Unknown	135,426 (53%)	131,593 (49%)	135,425 (43%)	-

Source: *North Borneo Census & Malaysia Population and Housing Census*

The data indicates that while Islam remained the dominant religion, the Christian population experienced rapid growth between 1921 and 1960. For instance, in 1921, there were 81,886 Muslims (32% of the population), but by 1960, this number had risen to 173,240 (38%). In contrast, the Christian population, which stood at only 6,980 (3%) in 1921, surged to 75,247 (17%) by 1960 (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020). These statistics reflect the effectiveness of Christian missionary strategies, which received protection and support from the British colonial administration.

In addition to supporting Christian missions, the colonial authorities imposed numerous restrictions on Islamic *da'wah* activities. One of the most significant incidents was the expulsion of Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub in 1956, a prominent Islamic preacher active in Putatan, Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu), Keningau, and Tenom. He successfully attracted many local people, including *mualaf* (converts), to deepen their understanding of Islam. However, his success in spreading Islam was perceived as a threat to Christian missionary efforts, leading the colonial authorities to take drastic action by expelling him from Sabah (Ramli, 1988).

Beyond direct actions against preachers, the British also enacted policies to restrict the expansion of Islam in Sabah. On April 15, 1935, the North Borneo Legislative Council approved the "Concentration of Mohammedan Community" policy, which prohibited the

migration of Muslims to non-Muslim areas (Yaacob, 2021). This policy not only limited social interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities but also reinforced Christian dominance in key strategic regions. Despite these restrictions, Islamic preachers continued their *da'wah* efforts, with *mualaf* playing a crucial role in spreading Islamic teachings within their own communities.

Overall, the spread of Islam in Sabah during the colonial era faced numerous obstacles that hindered its growth. The colonial administration prioritized the establishment of Christian educational institutions, while Islamic education developed at a much slower pace due to a lack of financial and infrastructural support. According to Aziz (2013), by 1970, there were only 68 Islamic religious schools across Sabah, compared to a significantly higher number of Christian schools that received direct colonial funding. These colonial policies were not merely aimed at spreading Christianity but also at consolidating British political and cultural influence in Sabah (Whitehead, 1893). Nevertheless, Islamic preachers remained steadfast in ensuring the continuity of Islamic teachings in Sabah, laying a strong foundation for the post-colonial expansion of Islam.

The British colonial administration's restrictions had profound social and psychological effects on Sabah's Muslim community. Legal policies enforcing segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims limited cultural interactions and reduced *da'wah* opportunities. Additionally, restricted access to education and infrastructure, which were prioritized for Christian communities, created socio-economic challenges for Muslims (Yaacob, 2021). Despite these obstacles, dedicated preachers and volunteers sustained Islam through informal religious classes and voluntary efforts. Although Islamic educational institutions were few, they played a vital role in educating the younger generation and preserving religious traditions. This resilience highlights Sabah's Muslim community's ability to maintain their religious identity despite colonial policies favoring Christian influence.

The Development of Islam in Post-Independence Sabah

The independence of Sabah was integral to the broader process of Malaysia's formation, strategically orchestrated by the British to reorganize the governance of Southeast Asian territories. North Borneo, as Sabah was previously known, had been a British protectorate since 1888 and only attained internal self-government on 31 August 1963 before officially joining the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. The incorporation of Sabah, alongside Sarawak, Singapore, and Malaya, was a pivotal element of the British decolonization strategy, referred to as the "Grand Design," which sought to establish long-term political and economic stability in the region. The decision to integrate Sabah into Malaysia was reinforced by the findings of the Cobbold Commission Report, which indicated that a majority of Sabahans were in favor of the union (Abdullah & Alih, 2017).

By 1960, Islam had established itself as the predominant religion in Sabah, with approximately 38% of the population identifying as Muslim. This growth was largely attributed to the efforts of *da'wah* movements and the role of religious institutions such as mosques and Islamic schools. Meanwhile, Christianity experienced significant expansion through missionary organizations that benefited from well-established infrastructure and educational funding, reaching 17% of the population. The concurrent rise of both religions reflected a profound transformation in Sabah's religious landscape, underscoring the critical

role of institutional support in religious propagation (Rasip, 2024). Despite having a larger number of adherents, the growth of Islam remained relatively slower than that of Christianity, which received direct backing from the colonial administration.

Post-independence, Islam retained its status as the predominant religion in Sabah; however, it had yet to attain a majority, as its expansion was impeded by insufficient political support. The state leadership at the time was predominantly composed of non-Muslim figures, resulting in minimal governmental attention towards Islamic development. Institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council and the Syariah Courts saw limited expansion, while mosque and *surau* construction remained restricted. The administrative framework of the state did not prioritize the institutional reinforcement of Islam, leaving *da'wah* efforts and religious education largely dependent on the initiatives of individual preachers and local Muslim communities. In the absence of strategic planning and robust institutional support, the progression of Islam in Sabah post-1963 was predominantly driven by grassroots initiatives, particularly in propagating Islamic teachings to rural communities (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020).

The Leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha in Strengthening Islam in Sabah

In the early years of Sabah's independence, the fact that Muslims had yet to achieve majority status posed a significant challenge to the establishment of Islam as the state religion. The state leadership at the time focused primarily on the development of non-Muslim communities, which resulted in limited attention being given to Islamic institutions such as the religious council (Yusoff, 1994). Without strong political support, the growth of Islam in Sabah remained slow and largely dependent on the initiatives of individuals and small organizations. This situation underscored the need for leadership that could advocate for the rights of the Muslim community and ensure the more structured development of Islam in the state.

Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun played a crucial role in consolidating the position of Islam in Sabah. Born on 31 August 1918 in Kudat, he was among the key leaders involved in the formation of Malaysia and a strong advocate for the rights of Muslim *bumiputera*. Before becoming Chief Minister, he served as the first Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Sabah (1963–1965). However, he later made a decisive move by contesting in the 1967 state elections, successfully securing the position of Chief Minister of Sabah, which he held from 1967 to 1976 (Osman, Ali, & Bee, 2006). This position granted him the authority to introduce various initiatives aimed at advancing Islam and strengthening religious institutions in Sabah.

As Chief Minister, Tun Mustapha implemented a range of measures to enhance the role of Islam in the state's administration. He established key Islamic institutions such as the Sabah Islamic Religious Council (*Majlis Agama Islam Sabah*, MUIS) and the Sabah State Department of Islamic Affairs (*Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Negeri Sabah*, JHEAINS) to ensure a more systematic administration of Islamic affairs. Additionally, he prioritized Islamic education by constructing religious schools and expanding educational opportunities for Muslims, particularly in rural areas. These efforts were intended to cultivate a knowledgeable Muslim generation and reinforce Islamic identity within Sabah's society (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020).

USIA as a Da'wah Platform and Its Long-Term Impact

Tun Mustapha recognized that the development of Islam in Sabah required a strong platform to coordinate *da'wah* efforts effectively. As a result, he established USIA in 1969 as a central body responsible for unifying and mobilizing *da'wah* initiatives across the state (Sulaiman, Cheang, & Amat, 2019). By consolidating various existing Islamic associations, USIA became a driving force for *da'wah*, education, and welfare programs, particularly for *mualaf*. Through this organization, the construction of mosques and *surau*, Islamic education classes, and social assistance for *mualaf* and underprivileged communities were carried out in a more structured manner.

In addition to strengthening USIA, Tun Mustapha also invited preachers from abroad, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Peninsular Malaysia, to assist in Islamic outreach efforts. Due to the limited number of local preachers, he took this initiative to ensure that *da'wah* could reach a wider audience, particularly in remote areas (Latif, 1994). The presence of foreign *da'i* played a crucial role in guiding communities toward a deeper understanding of Islam and in supporting the development of religious infrastructure, such as mosques and Islamic schools. This initiative accelerated the Islamization process in Sabah and reinforced Islamic knowledge among the indigenous population.

As a result of these *da'wah* efforts, the Muslim population in Sabah increased significantly. Prior to the establishment of USIA, Muslims made up approximately 38.7% of the population in 1967; by 1976, this figure had risen to 53% (Robert, 1976). This increase reflects the success of Tun Mustapha's strategies in strengthening the position of Islam in the state. Through the systematic implementation of programs under USIA, alongside efforts to enhance education and religious institutions, Islam continued to grow as a fundamental component of Sabah's social landscape. Tun Mustapha's legacy in championing Islam in Sabah remains relevant today, serving as an inspiration for future generations to continue advancing *da'wah* and the development of the Muslim community in the state.

Recognition of Islam as the State Religion

On 23 September 1973, Islam was officially recognized as the state religion of Sabah through an amendment to Article 5(A) of the Sabah State Constitution, while maintaining religious freedom for adherents of other faiths. This reflects the harmony among Sabah's multi-ethnic society (The Constitution of the State of Sabah, 2019). This recognition paved the way for the development of Islamic institutions such as MUIS, JHEAINS, and the Syariah Court. The administration of Islam was further strengthened through the systematic management of mosques and *surau*, Islamic education, and the facilitation of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. The Syariah Court, which officially began operations on 1 February 1978, replaced the Native Court in handling Islamic legal matters, making religious administration more structured and effective (Abdullah & Aliah, 2017).

The leadership of Tun Mustapha witnessed a significant surge in *da'wah* activities in Sabah, with over 75,000 individuals embracing Islam between 1969 and 1976, rising to nearly 100,000 when the children of *mualaf* were included (Sintang, 2005). This success was achieved through a harmonious and inclusive *da'wah* approach, attracting numerous prominent non-Muslim figures to Islam. One of the most historic moments in the development of Islam in Sabah was the acquisition of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in

Kota Kinabalu in 1974, which was subsequently converted into a mosque—a symbol of the era's *da'wah* achievements (Mat Kib, 2003). Tun Mustapha's tenure is remembered as the golden age of Islamic propagation in Sabah, with USIA playing a pivotal role in ensuring that Islam continued to grow and be respected as a fundamental component of the state's social structure (Rasip & Ab Razak, 2024).

Increase in the Muslim Population After Independence

The following table presents the growth of the Muslim population in Sabah after independence and the establishment of USIA until 1980.

No	Religion	1960	1970	1980
1	Islam	173,240 (38%)	260,945 (40%)	487,627 (51%)
2	Christianity	75,247 (17%)	157,422 (24%)	258,606 (27%)
3	Buddhism	-	63,313 (10%)	78,868 (8%)
4	Hinduism	-	-	2,896 (0.3%)
5	Others	206,740 (46%)	206,740 (46%)	65,078 (7%)
6	No Religion	-	-	57,481 (6%)
7	Total	454,311 (100%)	454,311 (100%)	950,556 (100%)

Source: North Borneo Census & Malaysia Population & Housing Census

Statistical data indicates a significant increase in both the Muslim and Christian populations in Sabah between 1960 and 1980. The Muslim population grew from 38% (173,240 people) in 1960 to 40% (260,945 people) in 1970, before reaching 51% (487,627 people) by 1980. This rise was closely linked to the expansion of *da'wah* activities following the establishment USIA in 1969. According to Aziz (2013), USIA played a crucial role in disseminating Islam to the indigenous communities through a more systematic *da'wah* approach. Under the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha, Islamization efforts intensified with the development of religious institutions and the strengthening of Islamic education, leading to greater acceptance of Islam among rural communities in Sabah.

At the same time, Christianity also experienced steady growth, increasing from 17% (75,247 people) in 1960 to 24% (157,422 people) in 1970, eventually reaching 27% (258,606 people) in 1980. This expansion was largely facilitated by strong support from the British North Borneo Chartered Company, which provided various facilities such as schools, clinics, and churches in rural areas. These infrastructures not only improved local education and healthcare standards but also served as centers for Christian missionary activities (Maria, 2004). Meanwhile, the category of "Others," which included traditional beliefs and minority religions, witnessed a sharp decline from 46% (206,740 people) in 1960 and 1970 to only 7% (65,078 people) by 1980. This trend reflects a significant religious transition among Sabah's population, where many abandoned traditional beliefs in favor of Islam and Christianity (Hajimin, Ag Omar, & Hajimin, 2020). These statistics illustrate that the transformation of Sabah's religious landscape was largely influenced by *da'wah* activities, the institutionalization of religious education, and colonial efforts in promoting Christianity. As a result, Islam and Christianity emerged as the dominant religions in the state.

The rapid increase in the Muslim and Christian populations between 1960 and 1980 contrasted with the sharp decline in adherence to traditional beliefs and minority religions. The Muslim population rose from 38% (173,240 people) in 1960 to 40% (260,945 people) in 1970 and further to 51% (487,627 people) by 1980. This growth was driven by intensified *da'wah* efforts after the establishment of USIA in 1969. Under Tun Datu Mustapha's leadership, USIA played a pivotal role in introducing Islam to indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus through an approach that respected local traditions while promoting Islamic teachings (Aziz, 2015). Additionally, USIA's focus on religious education, mosque construction, and support for *mualaf* contributed significantly to the rise in the Muslim population during this period.

Transformation of Sabah's Religious Landscape

Between 1960 and 1980, Christianity experienced significant growth, increasing from 17% in 1960 to 20% in 1970, and further reaching 30% by 1980. Missionary efforts, particularly through the provision of education and social services, played a crucial role in strengthening Christianity's influence among indigenous communities, especially in rural areas that had been exposed to Christian teachings since the British colonial era (Lazimin, 2018). The legacy of British administration also ensured that Christianity remained a major competitor in Sabah's religious landscape, even as Islamic *da'wah* activities intensified (Sintang, 2005).

At the same time, the proportion of adherents of other religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, declined from 46% in 1960 to 18% in 1970, and further to 10% in 1980, while the category of the "non-religious" also shrank to 10% by 1980. This shift reflects a major transformation in Sabah's religious landscape following independence and the establishment of USIA, where Islam emerged as the dominant religion through systematic *da'wah* under the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha, while Christianity expanded rapidly as the second-largest faith. The transition from traditional beliefs to Islam and Christianity highlights the significant role of religion in shaping Sabah's social and cultural identity (Aziz, 2015; Robert, 1976).

Additionally, this transformation reflects the impact of globalization and infrastructural development, which created greater opportunities for communities to engage with structured religious teachings. With the end of the colonial era and the strengthening of religious institutions, Islam and Christianity emerged as the central pillars of Sabah's social structure, replacing the diminishing influence of traditional belief systems.

Conclusion

The early development of Islam in Sabah, spanning from the 14th century to independence in 1963, was a long and complex process shaped by trade, local leadership, and geopolitical dynamics. Islam was first introduced by Arab and Chinese Muslim traders who conducted commerce in coastal areas such as Kudat, Sandakan, and Tawau. Through trade interactions and social relations, the local population gradually embraced Islamic teachings, with intermarriage and the integration of Islamic values into social norms serving as key factors in its dissemination.

Beyond trade, the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates played a crucial role in consolidating Islam's presence in Sabah, particularly along the eastern coast. Diplomatic ties and political influence from these sultanates ensured that Islam became an integral part of local life,

especially among the Bajau and Suluk communities. Although Western colonization weakened the political influence of both sultanates, Islam endured as a fundamental aspect of local society, marking the early success of its propagation.

The arrival of British colonial rule posed significant challenges to the expansion of Islam in Sabah, as Christian missionary activities were heavily supported through logistical aid, political protection, and the establishment of infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. This well-organized missionary strategy successfully attracted a substantial portion of Sabah's population, leading to a sharp increase in the number of Christian adherents throughout the colonial period.

Conversely, the growth of Islam in Sabah faced numerous restrictions under British rule. Islamic preachers, such as Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub, were expelled, while the "Concentration of Mohammedan Community" policy was introduced to limit the spread of Islam among non-Muslims. Despite these pressures, *da'wah* efforts persisted through the establishment of *madrrasah* and religious schools. The perseverance of Islamic scholars and the Muslim community in preserving and spreading Islamic teachings ensured the continuous, albeit gradual, expansion of Islam.

By the time of independence, Islam remained the dominant religion in Sabah, although Christianity continued to expand due to colonial support. Following independence, Islamic *da'wah* efforts were further reinforced through the establishment of USIA in 1969, spearheaded by Tun Datu Mustapha. This organization played a pivotal role in broadening Islamic influence, particularly in rural areas. Through mosque construction, religious education programs, and guidance for *mualaf*, the Muslim population in Sabah increased from 38% in 1960 to 51% in 1980, demonstrating the success of structured *da'wah* strategies.

Overall, the transformation of Sabah's religious landscape was driven by various factors, including effective Islamic *da'wah* initiatives, the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha, and the strong presence of Christian missionary activities. Islam emerged as the dominant religion, while Christianity solidified its position as the second-largest faith, replacing the declining influence of traditional beliefs. This transformation highlights the significant role of religion in shaping Sabah's social and cultural structure, fostering a balanced and harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could focus on the role of *mualaf* in shaping the Islamic identity of indigenous communities, particularly among the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus. An in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by *mualaf* and the effectiveness of post-1973 guidance programs, such as those implemented by USIA, MUIS and JHEAINS, would also be valuable. Additionally, comparative research on Islamic and Christian *da'wah* strategies in Sabah—examining the role of education and economic initiatives in attracting new adherents—could provide further insights. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of *da'wah* efforts and strengthen the position of *mualaf* in the Islamization process of Sabah.

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