

Competing Faiths Under Colonial Rule: Islamic Expansion, Christian Missionaries, and the Emergence of *Mualaf* in the Making of Religious Identity in Sabah

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i2/25548> DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i2/25548

Published Online: 11 June 2025

Abstract

This article examines the historical development of Islamic expansion and the emergence of Muslim converts (*mualaf*) in Sabah during the British colonial period. It highlights the interplay between Islamic proselytization, Christian missionary efforts, colonial governance, and indigenous belief systems. Islam was first introduced in the 14th century through maritime trade with Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao, followed by gradual conversions supported by Bruneian political influence and intermarriage. However, the 19th-century British administration actively supported Christian missions through legal, institutional, and infrastructural means—including access to education and healthcare—while Islamic propagation faced restrictions and lacked state backing. Using a qualitative approach based on historical document analysis, the study draws on primary sources such as census data, legislative records, and missionary archives. Through thematic analysis, the article identifies distinct religious dissemination patterns, power asymmetries, and socio-political shifts. While Islam grew through local initiatives and figures like Tun Datu Mustapha, Christianity gained rapid ground through colonial endorsement. Comparative demographic trends from 1921 to 1960 reveal a disproportionate increase in Christian converts, reflecting structural imbalances. The study concludes that Sabah's religious identity is the product of colonial-era negotiations between religious institutions, political structures, and indigenous agency—dynamics that continue to shape the region's postcolonial religious landscape.

Keywords: Islam in Sabah, Christian Missions, Colonial Policy, Religious Conversion, Indigenous Belief Systems

Introduction

The expansion of Islam in Sabah cannot be separated from the region's early international relations and active maritime networks across the Malay Archipelago (Hajimin et al., 2021). Prior to the arrival of major world religions such as Islam and Christianity, the indigenous communities of Sabah practiced a form of animism that attributed spiritual essence to every

element of nature. Trees, rivers, stones, and animals were believed to possess souls or spirits, forming the foundation of their ritual practices, daily customs, and communal values (Berinai, 2024). Nature was not only revered but also regarded as an integral part of the spiritual ecosystem that safeguarded and stabilized community life (Mahali, 2018). Within this context, the introduction of new religious teachings such as Islam did not immediately replace the existing belief system, but instead underwent a gradual and culturally sensitive process of adaptation and integration.

Islam began to take root in Sabah as early as the 14th century through trade relations with neighboring Islamic regions such as Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao (Adam, 2023). Muslim traders and missionaries brought with them not only goods and economic exchange but also the ethical values of Islam, which emphasized justice, compassion, and universal brotherhood (Khalli, Sintang & Ationg, 2023). The religion was introduced through peaceful means, embedding itself harmoniously within local customs and belief structures. Inter-marriage, diplomatic ties, and the political influence of the Brunei Sultanate further reinforced Islam's position in the social fabric of indigenous society. As a result, the acceptance of Islam occurred organically, shaping a religious identity that was gradually embraced by both coastal and inland communities across Sabah (Rasip, 2024).

However, the advancement of Islam did not proceed unchallenged. The arrival of British colonial powers in the 19th century brought with it a new political order that explicitly supported the spread of Christianity (Yusoff, 2004). Christian missionaries, backed by British authorities, were granted access, protection, and substantial resources to build institutions such as schools, hospitals, and churches—tools that greatly enhanced their presence and influence within local society (Yaacob, 2021). In stark contrast, Islam lacked institutional support under colonial rule and was frequently constrained by administrative policies that limited missionary activity and movement. Consequently, Islamic proselytization relied primarily on individual initiative and informal community networks, with little or no institutional or financial backing.

Despite these limitations, the resilience of local Muslim communities and the perseverance of Islamic missionaries sustained the continuity of Islamic presence and practice in Sabah. Prominent figures such as Imam Suhaili Haji Yaakub and Tun Datu Mustapha played key roles in maintaining Islamic missionary efforts during colonial times. In parallel, Christianity continued to grow rapidly through a well-coordinated missionary strategy strongly supported by the colonial state (Sintang et al., 2019). This juxtaposition created two contrasting trajectories of religious expansion: Islam through grassroots and cultural integration, and Christianity through institutional backing and modern infrastructure. These competing religious movements reflected broader colonial dynamics of power and cultural transformation, ultimately shaping Sabah's contemporary religious landscape—one marked by plurality, historical encounters with colonialism, and the enduring interplay of local adaptation (Aratin and Rahman, 2022).

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the development of Islam among the indigenous peoples of Sabah, the ways in which colonialism reshaped religious transmission, and how both Islam and Christianity expanded under highly unequal conditions of support and strategy. The study also compares the demographic trajectories of both religious groups

during the colonial period, using census data and historical records to explore colonial reactions to Islamic resurgence and the increasing number of *mualaf* converts. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious identities in Sabah were formed and negotiated under the forces of colonial rule and into the postcolonial era.

Literature Review

The literature reveals that the development of religion in Sabah, particularly Islam and Christianity, was profoundly shaped by the colonial framework that governed interactions between local cultures and external institutions. Mojijang and De Silva (2020) underscore the influential role of the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM) in shaping the social structures of the Rungus community in Kudat. Through a comprehensive missionary approach encompassing evangelism, education, healthcare, and welfare, Christianity was not only introduced as a new faith but also functioned as a transformative force in the local socio-cultural landscape. The establishment of Christian institutions facilitated the internalization of Western religious and cultural values, positioning missionary Christianity not merely as spiritual outreach but as a vehicle of socio-cultural modernization and identity reconstruction in colonial Sabah.

In contrast, the expansion of Islam during the same period encountered a vastly different set of challenges. Studies by Ramli (1988) highlight how British colonial policies—often informed by Orientalist discourses—systematically constrained Islamic propagation through administrative regulations and geographic restrictions. One notable measure was the prohibition on the migration of Muslims into non-Muslim areas, which significantly curtailed intercommunal interactions and cross-cultural missionary efforts. These constraints, the studies argue, had lasting effects on the psychosocial realities of *mualaf*, many of whom experienced identity dilemmas while navigating a social environment that increasingly favored Christian expansion (Yaacob, 2021). The comparative lens reveals a deep asymmetry in the opportunities afforded to Islamic and Christian missionary enterprises during the colonial period.

Further literature—such as the works of Mat Kib (2003) and Maria (2004)—situates Christian missionary activity within the broader colonial project driven by the triad of "God, Gold, and Glory." Christian missions benefited from substantial institutional support, including infrastructure development, legal protection, and funding from foreign sources. Conversely, Islamic propagation was largely sustained through grassroots efforts led by local figures like Imam Suhaili. Lazimin (2018) adds that Christian institutions such as the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) and the Protestant Church in Sabah (PCS) achieved significant penetration into the interior by employing socially inclusive approaches that addressed education, health, and community welfare. These findings reinforce the argument that institutional strength and international networks were critical to the relative success of Christian missions in Sabah.

Complementing these institutional analyses, Aliakbar and Rasip (2024) explore the challenges faced by *mualaf* in the post-conversion phase, particularly concerning psychosocial adaptation and identity pressures. Although their research focuses on the national context, their findings are equally relevant in Sabah, where religious pluralism and interfaith competition remain prominent. Issues such as limited access to religious guidance, familial

tension, and societal prejudice complicate the *mualaf* experience, especially in the absence of robust Islamic support systems. This highlights the urgent need for a more strategic and contextually sensitive approach to Islamic outreach, one that prioritizes long-term engagement and identity consolidation within plural and postcolonial realities.

To assess the long-term implications of these competing religious trajectories, Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin (2020) examine changes in Sabah's religious demographics between 1921 and 1960. Their findings indicate that although Islam remained the largest religious group numerically, Christianity experienced a more aggressive and systematic growth, supported by strategic missionary operations under colonial sponsorship. Meanwhile, Artini and Rahman (2022) call for further investigation into the factors influencing Islamic conversion, particularly among *mualaf*. Jominal's (2020) case study of Ustazah Lilis Mulyani illustrates the effectiveness of a *da'wah bil-hikmah* (wisdom-based outreach) approach in attracting indigenous communities through peaceful and culturally resonant means. Such examples demonstrate that strategic, empathetic, and community-based Islamic outreach can yield meaningful religious transformation.

Taken together, this body of literature demonstrates how the colonial-era competition between Islamic and Christian missions produced a religious landscape in Sabah that remains complex and uneven. While Christianity gained a significant institutional advantage through colonial alignment, Islam advanced through localized efforts and small community networks. Within this dynamic, *mualaf* emerge as pivotal figures, embodying the tensions between traditional beliefs and newly embraced faiths amid colonial disruption. This study seeks to bridge existing gaps in the scholarship by emphasizing the necessity of contextually grounded, inclusive, and historically responsive missionary strategies to better understand and support religious identity formation in Sabah's plural and postcolonial setting.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on a historical literature review design. Primary sources include colonial documents such as the *North Borneo Census Reports*, records of the North Borneo Legislative Council meetings, missionary accounts, and administrative reports of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC). In addition to these, the study also draws upon secondary sources including historical monographs, academic journal articles, and relevant ethnographic and anthropological reports concerning the development of religion in Sabah. Thematic analysis was employed to identify significant patterns related to the spread of Islam and Christianity, missionary strategies, colonial responses to Islamic proselytization, and changes in religious demographics throughout the colonial period. Data were analyzed descriptively and interpretively to compare the approaches, institutional support, and long-term implications for Sabah's religious structures. This research is exploratory in nature, aiming to understand the complex interactions among religion, colonial power, and indigenous culture in shaping the religious landscape of Sabah. Emphasis is therefore placed on the historical and sociopolitical contexts that framed the dynamics of religious dissemination among indigenous communities from the 19th to the early 20th century.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. **Explain how British colonialism influenced the dynamics of religious dissemination in Sabah**, including the imbalance of institutional support between Islam and Christianity, and the long-term effects on the region's religious structures.
2. **Examine the development and spread of Islam and Christianity in Sabah during the colonial era**, including the missionary strategies employed, the forms of institutional support received, and the colonial authorities' responses to Islamic missionary efforts.
3. **Compare the demographic growth of Muslim and Christian populations based on historical data and census records**, and identify the sociopolitical and colonial factors that shaped the patterns of religious dissemination and acceptance among Sabah's indigenous communities.

Research Findings

The Arrival of Islam in Sabah

Islam first reached the region of Sabah around the 14th century, facilitated by active maritime trade networks linking key areas in the Malay Archipelago such as Brunei, Sulawesi, and Mindanao (Hajimin et al., 2021). Muslim traders introduced not only material goods but also the ethical and spiritual values of Islam, including principles of justice, compassion, and universal brotherhood (Sugandi & Romdhoni, 2023). Islamic teachings were conveyed with wisdom and gentleness—through exemplary conduct and transactional fairness rather than coercion—fostering trust and respect among local communities. This non-confrontational approach enabled a gradual and peaceful acceptance of Islam, resulting in a harmonious integration of Islamic values into indigenous social structures (Syed Hamid and Akhmetova, 2019). As a result, Islam catalyzed transformations in the local value system, with concepts such as *tawhid* (monotheism), justice, and social solidarity becoming central tenets in both communal and familial relations.

The initial contact between Muslim traders and indigenous communities extended far beyond economic exchange. Intermarriage played a vital role in fostering deeper social bonds, accelerating the assimilation of Islamic values into local culture. Over time, Islam permeated various aspects of everyday life—from marital customs to family structures and social celebrations (Borham, Abdullah & Abdul Rahim, 2021). Rather than being viewed as foreign, Islam was gradually embraced as a complementary force that enriched local traditions and moral frameworks. Islamic elements were naturally incorporated into local rituals and customs, often without conflict, indicating a phased and harmonious Islamization process (Sudarman et al., 2021). Thus, the acceptance of Islam in Sabah occurred not through confrontation or cultural displacement, but through adaptation and mutual respect, laying the foundations for a spiritual and cultural identity that endures to this day.

Political factors also played a significant role in reinforcing the spread of Islam in Sabah. During the period when Sabah fell under the sphere of influence of the Brunei Sultanate, Bruneian rulers actively supported the propagation of Islam by empowering local institutions and leadership (Yusoff, 1994). Members of the local nobility, many of whom maintained close ties with the Bruneian royal court, facilitated the official acceptance of Islam. The establishment of key institutions such as mosques and madrasahs provided a structural foundation for religious dissemination and the consolidation of a more organized and cohesive Muslim

community (Sintang et al., 2019). These institutions functioned not only as centers of worship but also as sites of religious education, transmission of Islamic knowledge, and the formation of a collective Muslim identity grounded in Islamic teachings.

Importantly, the Bruneian approach to religious governance was characterized by inclusivity and tolerance, allowing Islam to spread steadily across diverse communities, even in the face of eventual colonial intervention by Western powers (Mat Kib, 2003). This legacy helped embed Islamic institutions deeply within Sabah's religious landscape, enabling their survival and adaptation through successive waves of political and social transformation. Today, many of these historical institutions continue to serve as cultural and spiritual anchors for Muslim communities across the state, testifying to the enduring impact of early Islamic expansion under local patronage.

The Arrival of Christian Missionaries in Sabah

By the early 19th century, although Islam had already established roots within certain segments of Sabah's population, the arrival of Christian missionaries from the West introduced a new challenge to the religious landscape. Indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun and other native ethnic groups—many of whom still adhered to traditional animistic beliefs—gradually became receptive to Christianity due to the strategic and methodical approach of the missionaries. The British colonial administration actively supported this missionary endeavor, reinforcing Christianity's position as a key instrument of colonial policy (Mojijang & De Silva, 2020). At that time, Sabah—then known as North Borneo—was not only considered a strategically important region economically and politically, but also viewed as fertile ground for religious expansion. Initially, Christian ecclesiastical administration was centered in Sarawak before being transferred to Labuan (Richard, 1999). Following the takeover of North Borneo's administration by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) in 1881, missionary efforts were intensified, targeting not only non-Muslim populations but also the small Muslim minority (Maria, 2004).

Missionaries representing various denominations—including Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant—were dispatched to Sabah with full colonial backing, receiving infrastructural support, security protection, and logistical assistance. Through the establishment of schools, hospitals, and churches, they introduced not only religious teachings but also Western values embedded within education and social services (Aziz, 2013). For instance, Reverend Father Francis Thomas McDougall played a pivotal role as Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak beginning in 1855 and later expanded Anglican influence into Sabah. Coastal towns such as Kudat, Sandakan, Tawau, and Papar became early missionary hubs due to their accessibility and population density (Mat Kib, 2003). Over time, missionary activities extended into the interior with the arrival of denominations such as Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), the Protestant Church in Sabah (PCS), Roman Catholic missions, and the Seventh-Day Adventists, all of which focused their efforts on rural communities and regions yet to be reached by any institutionalized religion (Lazimin, 2018).

The Christian missionary movement cannot be dissociated from the broader objectives of British colonial strategy, encapsulated in the well-known triad: "God, Gold, and Glory." Christianity functioned as a vehicle for the dissemination of Western ideological influence, serving both political consolidation and economic domination (Kamal & Resad, 2022).

Institutions established by the missionaries not only facilitated religious conversion but also acted as platforms for inculcating colonial culture and values among local populations. In this sense, the spread of Christianity became an integral component of a wider colonial project, whereby religion was employed as a key medium for constructing a social order conducive to colonial interests (Muhiddin, 1990).

In contrast, the propagation of Islam in Sabah during the same period continued to rely on grassroots efforts, driven by trade-based interactions, non-coercive missionary ethics, and political networks such as the Brunei Sultanate (Sudarman et al., 2021). Islam was accepted peacefully, as it did not disrupt traditional adat structures and was easily assimilated into local cultural practices. Meanwhile, the strength of the Christian movement lay in its systematic dissemination—backed by colonial power and institutionalized through schools and hospitals as formal vehicles of religious outreach (Sugandi and Romdhoni, 2023). Hence, the encounter between these two religions was not merely a matter of spiritual competition, but a deeper contestation of narratives—of power, culture, and ideological influence—within the colonial context.

Christian Missionary Activity in Colonial Sabah

The support extended by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) was a decisive catalyst for the rapid expansion of Christian missionary activity in Sabah. As a colonial entity, the BNBCC did not merely focus on administrative and economic affairs but also facilitated religious propagation as part of its broader colonial agenda (Mojijang & De Silva, 2020). Missionaries were granted access to the interior, supported with logistics and guaranteed protection, enabling them to conduct missionary work in a systematic and organized manner. Institutions such as schools, churches, and health clinics functioned not only as social service centers but also as key channels for disseminating Western religious and cultural values among the indigenous population (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

Numerous foreign missionary organizations capitalized on these opportunities to extend their influence in Sabah. Among the most active were the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Other contributors included the Australian Church Missionary Society, the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the Borneo Evangelical Mission (Mat Zain, 2003). Each organization adapted its missionary approach to local contexts and community needs (Muhiddin, 1990). For example, St. Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society of Mill Hill, based in England, was noted for its systematic evangelization through church-building and the establishment of educational institutions. Meanwhile, the Borneo Evangelical Mission emphasized a more inclusive model that integrated education and healthcare into their missionary outreach in rural regions.

Innovation, particularly in the use of modern technology, became a defining feature of missionary activity. The Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) utilized aircraft to connect remote interior settlements with central mission stations, thereby extending the geographic reach of their influence (Lazimin, 2018). Areas such as Keningau, Tenom, and Pensiangan, previously difficult to access, were increasingly opened to Christian influence through these logistical innovations. Aircraft transported not only missionaries but also essential supplies such as food, medical equipment, and construction materials. In this way, technology played

a critical role in penetrating isolated communities and embedding Christianity within them (Ismail, 1994).

One of the most enduring achievements of Christian missionary efforts was the establishment of Christian schools throughout various districts. Schools such as St. Mary's in Sandakan (1883), St. Joseph's in Papar (1881), and the school in Inobong, Penampang (1887) were not only centers of basic literacy but also sites for religious instruction and moral education (Mojijang & De Silva, 2020). Churches such as St. James in Kudat likewise served dual roles as places of worship and centers of early colonial education (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015). This underscores the central role of education in shaping the religious foundation and cultural orientation of local communities.

As the educational network extended into rural areas, Christianity was systematically introduced to interior populations. Missionary schools did more than provide literacy; they instilled a worldview and lifestyle aligned with Western Christian values. The enthusiastic reception among rural communities demonstrated that education was the most effective strategy for influencing long-term social transformation. Between 1940 and 1963, the number of Christian schools in Sabah increased from 27 to 121 (Ismail, 2004), underscoring the effectiveness of a missionary model rooted in the integration of religious and public services. This success reflected the strong cooperation between colonial institutions and missionary bodies in reshaping both the religious and social fabric of Sabah (Mat Kib, 2003).

The long-term impact of missionary activity is evident in the profound transformation of Sabah's social and cultural structures. Education grounded in Western Christian values produced new generations that were more attuned to Christian norms and colonial modes of life (Mojijang & De Silva, 2020). Missionary schools also fostered distinct religious identities among interior communities previously rooted in animistic traditions (Kamal & Resad, 2022). Simultaneously, the development of social infrastructure—such as hospitals and welfare centers—by church institutions improved living standards but also cultivated a form of dependency on the church for basic needs (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

Ultimately, missionary activity in colonial Sabah significantly altered interfaith dynamics. The dominance of Christian institutions in education and social services created a structural divide between Christian and Muslim communities, particularly as missionary expansion was comprehensively supported by colonial power (Lazimin, 2018). While intercommunal relations generally remained peaceful, the rapid growth of Christian adherents—driven by strategic missionary work and colonial endorsement—led to the formation of a new social structure rooted in Christian institutions and values (Maria, 2004). To this day, the legacy of this missionary-colonial nexus continues to shape Sabah's educational systems, community structures, and cultural identities.

The Transformation of Islam in Sabah and Its Recognition as the State Religion

Despite enduring political pressure and discriminatory colonial policies, the resilience of Sabah's Muslim community remained unwavering. One of the most pressing challenges was the lack of access to religious education (Hajimin, Ag Omar & Hajimin, 2020). By 1970, only 68 Islamic religious schools existed across Sabah—a stark contrast to the rapid proliferation of Christian schools, which had benefited from decades of missionary and colonial support

(Aziz, 2013). This limited educational infrastructure made it difficult to systematically cultivate Islamic understanding and practice among the younger generation.

In contrast, Christian education expanded significantly through missionary school networks that offered not only academic instruction but also embedded religious indoctrination within the curriculum (Mat Kib, 2003). The accessibility and quality of these schools attracted many local inhabitants, including non-Christians, who saw education as a path to upward mobility. This created a significant disparity between Islamic and Christian educational development in the region (Rasip et al., 2025b).

Nevertheless, the post-colonial era marked a turning point in the revitalization of Islam in Sabah. A significant Islamic resurgence emerged under the leadership of figures like Tun Datu Mustapha, who played a central role in elevating Islam to the status of state religion. Recognizing the need to consolidate Islam's political and social standing, he promoted inclusive policies and prioritized the establishment of sustainable religious institutions (Aziz, 2015).

With the support of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA), Tun Datu Mustapha spearheaded a structured and culturally grounded missionary movement (Sintang, 2005). His approach facilitated the broader acceptance of Islam across various ethnic communities, including those not traditionally aligned with the faith. These efforts culminated in the formal recognition of Islam as the official religion of Sabah in 1973 (Syed Hamid & Akhmetova, 2019). This milestone led to the institutionalization of key bodies such as the Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah (MUIS), the Syariah Court, and the zakat administration system.

These institutions not only reinforced the status of Islam in Sabah but also laid a strong foundation for the holistic development of Islamic life—including religious education, jurisprudence, and Muslim socioeconomics (Abdullah and Alih, 2017). Thus, although Islam's journey in Sabah under colonial rule was marked by suppression and marginalization, the post-independence era witnessed a remarkable resurgence. This transformation stands as testament to the tenacity and strategic adaptability of Sabah's Muslim community in advancing and institutionalizing their religious identity (Rasip et al., 2025a).

Muslim and Christian Population Growth: A Comparative Analysis

An examination of Sabah's religious demographic composition from the colonial period leading up to independence reveals a significant transformation in the state's socio-religious landscape. Official census data from 1921, 1931, 1951, and 1960 show a steady increase in the Muslim population, which remained the largest religious group—rising from 32% in 1921 to 38% by 1960. However, the growth of the Christian population was even more striking, increasing from just 3% in 1921 to 17% by 1960.

Table 1

Source: North Borneo Census & Malaysian Population and Housing Census

No	Religion	1921	1931	1951	1960
1	Islam	81886 (32%)	86713 (32%)	115126 (37%)	17324 (38%)
2	Christianity	6980 (3%)	10454 (4%)	29092 (9%)	75247 (17%)
3	Buddhism, Hinduism, Others	33513 (13%)	41463 (15%)	33513 (11%)	206740 (46%)
4	Unaffiliated/ Unknown	135426 (53%)	131593 (49%)	135425 (43%)	
	Total	257804 (100%)	270223 (100%)	313156 (100%)	454311 (100%)

These differing growth trajectories reveal not only numerical trends but also fundamental differences in missionary approaches and institutional support structures. Islam expanded gradually through the efforts of local Muslim communities, religious teachers, and prominent figures such as Tun Datu Mustapha, who worked to contextualize Islamic teachings within the indigenous cultural framework (Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, 2020). However, Islamic propagation at the time lacked formal institutional support, had limited financial access, and was devoid of comprehensive political protection.

By contrast, the spread of Christianity received a significant boost from the systematic and well-coordinated efforts of missionary networks that operated with full backing from the British colonial government (Whitehead, 1893). Missionaries were granted access to interior regions and were supported through the establishment of schools, clinics, churches, and other essential infrastructure. These efforts enabled them to offer free education and healthcare services—appealing social goods that attracted local populations and facilitated the acceptance of Christianity (Mahali, 2018).

Beyond the growth of Islam and Christianity, significant changes also occurred in the categories of “other religions” and “unaffiliated or unknown.” The number of adherents to other religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, rose markedly—from 13% in 1921 to 46% in 1960. This increase is largely attributed to the influx of migrant laborers from China and India, particularly in sectors such as plantations, mining, and trade. Simultaneously, the percentage of the population categorized as unaffiliated or unknown declined from 53% in 1921 to 43% by 1951 and was no longer reported explicitly in the 1960 census. This reflects a shift from traditional beliefs such as animism toward institutionalized religions (Rasip and Ab Razak, 2024).

The comparison suggests that although Islam was introduced earlier through Bruneian influence and Muslim trade networks, its growth was constrained by a lack of institutional support and favorable policies. Christianity, on the other hand, thrived in a supportive environment—bolstered by colonial policies, global missionary networks, and expansive strategies that included social services such as education and healthcare (Adam, 2023).

More importantly, the statistical data suggest that no single religion held absolute dominance by the time of independence. Instead, they highlight Sabah’s distinctive religious pluralism and the inherent imbalance that characterized its religious development. These patterns

reveal the extent to which political, economic, and cultural dynamics influenced the trajectory of religious propagation. In essence, the comparative growth of Islam and Christianity was not only shaped by internal community efforts but also by external structural advantages and historical contingencies. While Islam remained the majority religion by 1960, the rapid rise of Christianity signaled the formation of a complex, pluralistic religious landscape shaped by intersecting forces of *da'wah*, colonialism, and sociopolitical transformation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that prior to the arrival of external religions such as Islam and Christianity, the indigenous communities of Sabah lived within an animistic belief system deeply intertwined with the natural environment. Every element of nature—trees, rivers, stones, and animals—was believed to possess a spiritual essence that was not only respected but also venerated through various life rituals. These beliefs formed the foundation of a complex social system, encompassing ceremonies related to birth, marriage, death, and seasonal cycles. Animism functioned not merely as a spiritual framework but as a moral and social order that fostered communal harmony, collective responsibility, and ecological continuity. As such, the introduction of foreign religious teachings, particularly Islam and Christianity, necessitated a careful and culturally sensitive process of integration to avoid disrupting the long-established social equilibrium.

Islam was introduced to Sabah as early as the 14th century through active maritime trade networks connecting Brunei, Mindanao, and Sulawesi. Muslim traders brought not only goods but also the values and teachings of Islam, conveyed through personal conduct, ethical behavior, and everyday practices. The spread of Islam was gradual and organic, facilitated through social interactions, intermarriage, and community ties. This non-confrontational approach emphasized harmony with local customs. The influence of the Brunei Sultanate, which practiced Islam as the state religion, provided further political legitimacy, especially in coastal areas. However, the arrival of British colonial authorities curtailed this growth, as Islamic missionary activities were marginalized through unsupportive administrative policies and direct interventions against local preachers.

In contrast, the arrival of Western Christian missionaries in the early 19th century marked a new phase in Sabah's religious landscape. Missionary efforts from major denominations such as the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Protestants received comprehensive support from British colonial administrators. These missionaries introduced not only religious doctrines but also Western cultural values, which were presented as modern and civilized—ideals that aligned with the broader colonial agenda. The construction of churches, schools, and hospitals became instrumental to the spread of Christianity, combining religious outreach with the provision of education and healthcare services. Technological advancements, such as the use of aircraft, allowed missionaries to reach remote interior regions, overcoming geographical isolation. The success of these missions was measured not only by the number of converts but also by their ability to influence indigenous culture, lifestyle, and worldview.

The comparison between Islamic and Christian expansion during the colonial period reveals a stark disparity in structural support, missionary strategies, and political endorsement. Islam was propagated through the dedication of individuals such as Imam Suhaili and other local leaders, but was hindered by colonial restrictions. Christianity, on the other hand, was backed

by international missionary networks and supported by colonial policies that embedded religion within the broader objectives of “God, Gold, and Glory.” Thus, while Islam remained the majority religion in terms of adherents by 1960, the growth of Christianity was more aggressive, systematic, and far-reaching. This suggests that religious development was influenced not only by the content of the message but also by the political context, availability of infrastructure, and the effectiveness of long-term institutional planning.

Following the colonial era, significant efforts to elevate the status of Islam were led by influential figures such as Tun Datu Mustapha. Through the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA), he restructured Islamic missionary efforts with a more inclusive and strategic approach, emphasizing the cultural adaptability of Islam. This approach facilitated broader acceptance across diverse ethnic groups. As a result, Islam was formally recognized as the official religion of Sabah in 1973. This recognition laid the groundwork for the establishment of major institutions such as the Sabah Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Syariah Court, and a formal zakat administration system. These institutions have played a vital role in the comprehensive development of Islam in Sabah, particularly in education, law, and socio-economic sectors. Nevertheless, the legacy of Christian missionary efforts remains deeply embedded in the educational and welfare systems, highlighting the long-term effectiveness of colonial strategies in shaping social structures.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the development of religion in Sabah during the colonial era was the result of complex interactions between missionary efforts, political power, local cultures, and colonial interests. Islam developed under adverse conditions but remained deeply rooted through community resilience and the efforts of local leaders, while Christianity flourished through strategic institutional support from colonial authorities. Today, Sabah’s religious landscape reflects this intricate historical interaction—characterized by diversity, dynamism, and an enduring process of evolution in the postcolonial period.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This study demonstrates that prior to the arrival of external religions such as Islam and Christianity, the indigenous communities of Sabah lived within an animistic belief system deeply intertwined with the natural environment. Every element of nature—trees, rivers, stones, and animals—was believed to possess a spiritual essence that was not only respected but also venerated through various life rituals. These beliefs formed the foundation of a complex social system, encompassing ceremonies related to birth, marriage, death, and seasonal cycles. Animism functioned not merely as a spiritual framework but as a moral and social order that fostered communal harmony, collective responsibility, and ecological continuity. As such, the introduction of foreign religious teachings, particularly Islam and Christianity, necessitated a careful and culturally sensitive process of integration to avoid disrupting the long-established social equilibrium.

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which practiced Islam as the state religion, provided further political legitimacy, especially in coastal areas. However, the arrival of British colonial authorities curtailed this growth, as Islamic missionary activities were marginalized through unsupportive administrative policies and direct interventions against local preachers.

In contrast, the arrival of Western Christian missionaries in the early 19th century marked a new phase in Sabah's religious landscape. Missionary efforts from major denominations such as the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Protestants received comprehensive support from British colonial administrators. These missionaries introduced not only religious doctrines but also Western cultural values, which were presented as modern and civilized—ideals that aligned with the broader colonial agenda. The construction of churches, schools, and hospitals became instrumental to the spread of Christianity, combining religious outreach with the provision of education and healthcare services. Technological advancements, such as the use of aircraft, allowed missionaries to reach remote interior regions, overcoming geographical isolation. The success of these missions was measured not only by the number of converts but also by their ability to influence indigenous culture, lifestyle, and worldview.

The comparison between Islamic and Christian expansion during the colonial period reveals a stark disparity in structural support, missionary strategies, and political endorsement. Islam was propagated through the dedication of individuals such as Imam Suhaili and other local leaders, but was hindered by colonial restrictions. Christianity, on the other hand, was backed by international missionary networks and supported by colonial policies that embedded religion within the broader objectives of "God, Gold, and Glory." Thus, while Islam remained the majority religion in terms of adherents by 1960, the growth of Christianity was more aggressive, systematic, and far-reaching. This suggests that religious development was influenced not only by the content of the message but also by the political context, availability of infrastructure, and the effectiveness of long-term institutional planning.

Following the colonial era, significant efforts to elevate the status of Islam were led by influential figures such as Tun Datu Mustapha. Through the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA), he restructured Islamic missionary efforts with a more inclusive and strategic approach, emphasizing the cultural adaptability of Islam. This approach facilitated broader acceptance across diverse ethnic groups. As a result, Islam was formally recognized as the official religion of Sabah in 1973. This recognition laid the groundwork for the establishment of major institutions such as the Sabah Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Syariah Court, and a formal zakat administration system. These institutions have played a vital role in the comprehensive development of Islam in Sabah, particularly in education, law, and socio-economic sectors. Nevertheless, the legacy of Christian missionary efforts remains deeply embedded in the educational and welfare systems, highlighting the long-term effectiveness of colonial strategies in shaping social structures.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the development of religion in Sabah during the colonial era was the result of complex interactions between missionary efforts, political power, local cultures, and colonial interests. Islam developed under adverse conditions but remained deeply rooted through community resilience and the efforts of local leaders, while Christianity flourished through strategic institutional support from colonial authorities.

Today, Sabah's religious landscape reflects this intricate historical interaction—characterized by diversity, dynamism, and an enduring process of evolution in the postcolonial period.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This research contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by offering a contextualized historical analysis of religious development in Sabah. Theoretically, it engages with and extends scholarly discussions on religious transformation within colonized societies, demonstrating how indigenous belief systems, colonial policies, and missionary strategies interact to shape religious trajectories. By focusing on the comparison between Islamic and Christian propagation, this study adds depth to the understanding of how structural power, cultural negotiation, and socio-political contexts influence religious identity formation. Contextually, it fills a gap in the historiography of East Malaysia by highlighting the unique experiences of Sabah, which differ markedly from Peninsular Malaysia. The findings provide not only academic insight but also practical relevance for interreligious dialogue, policy-making, and the formulation of inclusive religious outreach programs in multicultural societies. As such, the study reinforces the importance of historical awareness in contemporary efforts toward religious harmony and nation-building.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens avenues for further research into the long-term impact of Christian missionary strategies and Islamic *da'wah* on the formation of religious identity in postcolonial Sabah. Future inquiries could focus on comparative analyses of post-independence generations, particularly in terms of religious education, social integration, and interfaith relations. Community-based ethnographic studies would also be valuable in exploring how colonial legacies continue to shape grassroots religious dynamics within Sabah's multi-ethnic and multicultural society.

Funding

Gratitude is extended to Universiti Malaysia Sabah for providing the Research Cluster Grant DKP0052 to fund this study.

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