

**PROSELYTIZING DEVELOPMENT IN SABAH: A  
HISTORICAL STUDY  
ABOUT 1946-1990**

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**Abstract:** This article issues about the spread and development of Islam in Sabah around 1946-1990. The period was terrible as the society of Sabah mostly went with the belief of animism, paganism, and the practices of *keburafat* (related to the myth). During the period, the proselytizers considerably faced challenges of Christian action which was massively spread by British colony. In addition to this, the method of this study is the library research along with a number of opinions among graduates towards discussing this issue. Consequently, it is found that the primary role of spreading and development of Islam during the period was much set the group of *Sufisms*, the merchants, and the moving foreigners from Sabah such Malay Brunei and the Buginese of Indonesia. Furthermore, the existence of Islam over the world and the appearance of Dakwah organization in this country is the result of scarification who did not feel tired at all. In order to continuously survive the values of Islam around Sabah, the proselytizers, after the period, necessarily have short-term and long-term planning.

**Keywords:** Animism, Paganism, Sufism, Long-term, Planning

## **Introduction**

The development of Islam in Sabah took a very long process, so it could keep its golden period up today. This condition long lasted since the Sabah had been many times occupied by some leaders. This was ever under control of the kingdom of Brunei and the Sultanate of Sulu, The British Colonization, the Japanese Colonization, which was later re-colonized by the British. Consequently, that country joined along with Malaysia in September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Considerably, the multi-cultures and the influence of this power, of course, proved the differences one another in all aspects. In addition to this, the difference between all language types, religions, and the conception of British and Japanese.

## **The Sabah**

Sabah is one nation geographically located in Borneo Island. The nation is well known with The North Borneo especially the period of British kingdom colonization. The island of Borneo is then divided apart to Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Sultan Brunei Darussalam. To specify, Malaysia is represented by the northern regions, including Sabah and Sarawak while Indonesia is represented by Borneo, yet all over the regions of Brunei. In addition to this, the Borneo Island is considerably the third largest island in the earth after Greenland and New Guinea with approximately 758,000 km square. The island, furthermore, is well-known with several name, one of is Tanjung Negara. However, the

origin name of Indonesians is the Island of Begawan Bawi Lewo Telo. The south, west, east, and north Borneo all is demographically included Indonesia, even though the North Borneo such Sarawak and Sabah partly belong to Malaysia. Moreover, Brunei is also an independent nation (Tjilik Riwt 1979).

Though after having independence and joining with Malay land, Singapore, and Sarawak then form new Malay federation on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963. For this reason, the North Borneo is then well-known with the name of Sabah. Not only that, it is also familiar with the name North Malaysia (Muhamad Rodzi, 2003). The demands of Independence are surely understood as sub-region rather than regions surrounding Sabah that up now, fight for Independence just like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sarawak, and Brunei. It is just soon after the second war world in 1946 until 1850 (Johari, 1983).

The idea of getting Sabah into Malaysia had been actually proposed in May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1961 by the honor Abdul Rahman in Singapore. The sub-region of this makes the efforts done intensively and well-structured. The first level was organized by *Jawatankuasa Perundingan Perpanduan Malaysia* (JPPM), followed by Suruhanjaya Cobbold along with *Jawatankuasa among Kingdoms* (IGC). The participation of Sabah into Malaysia considerably runs well and well-organized though it cannot be denied the existence of few resistances towards the related events. The ideas and planning of this, in fact, arose lot serious polemics, so that,

Indonesia and Philippines will seriously decide the diplomatic relation with Malaysia, even though that way caused dissatisfaction for both nations. Then, it becomes in reality if the statement got legacy and valued by visiting groups by united nations which are formed to fulfill the needs of *Jiran* (the neighborhood) which is well known to provoke the development of Malaysia (Mohamad Rodzi, 2003).

It then should be remembered that during the involving period of Sabah into Malaysia, the religion of Islam has widely spread into the society. Not only that, it has naturally become the guides and daily applications of most society before the colonization. As stated in the writing by Sabihah Osman (1981) which describes that “Certain forms of education had already existed in the Malay-Muslim society before the coming of the chartered company”.

### **The spread of Islam to Sabah.**

The coming of Islam into Sabah has just opened the new hope into many aspects of society. The paradigm has caused an evolution existing in a culture, government, and some impressions of *aqidah* (belief) transformation is the saying Allah SWT the only God. In addition to this, before the shine of Islam shining the area of Sabah, the most society, according to the history, strongly believed towards the belief of animism, paganism, and *keburafat* doctrines. The impacts also influence in written context, which makes the Javanese writing as the rolling medium which functions

as the spreader during that time.

The religious factor which is considerably beautiful enough, easy, and right based on the natural principles of humans which is then added by the wise proselytizer into applying and using the effective strategy and approaches. It then fastens the society when they are at the time approaching and supposed to believe Islam. This further can be seen in the writing of Majul (1988): "Islam is considerably achieved by most local natives as in regard with how the religion is spoken and published to the societies which satisfy their aspirations and spiritual hopes. Islam just gives understandings about self-prestige and at the same time, gives everyone about love to wide society. The interesting Islamic characters satisfy the spiritual willing through deep and continuous way. Afterwards, it then becomes the main factor into the development and exposure of Islam".

In addition to this, the development of *dakwah* (proselytizing) can also be seen, in order that, to further the significant roles by *sufish*, which by this, they are respected and honored among the society. This community is the main community which has particular excellences, in particular from the side of spirituality (Muhidin, 1982). Furthermore, this group just has produced a new phenomenon among society. Therefore, many people are successfully attracted to believe Islam. It is considerably caused by a good personality, and high education. Moreover, this kind of community is strongly correlated with legend and spiritual stories. This statement is supported by Gowing (1969) stating that

the gather coming of local people in the land of Sulu is then caused by their willing to believe Islam along with the group of Sufi at the pointed period. The role of prominent Sufism in the period could be tracked through Fatimiy (1973) which is “Islam miraculously spread through the magical powers of the *makhdoms* and *maulanans* who came from the region above the wind.

The chronological history of Abdullah in Lahad Datu in 1408 by Sharif Awliya Karim Al-Makhdum, for surely, showed the group of Sufism who has played important role regarding the spread of Islam in Sabah (Muhidin, 1990). As written in ‘Tarsila Sulu’, there is term called the coming of society from many regions into the stay of Makhdum Sharif Awliya. The magic and spirituality of Al-Makhdum as one of prominent Sufism which later becomes so much influential regarding the Islam of society then has a truly fact. To illustrate, this social group just proves running along the water, fly up the air, and save people who are mostly insane and very weak (Majul, 1988). Additionally, according to Awang Mohd, Jamil (1990), the spirituality of Sharif Awliya can be seen very closer to the island of Tawi-Tawi.

For this reason, it can be understood that the example showing the magic power if the *Surban* along his neck just felt down to the water once he took ablution. According to M. Yap Liape Ligadong, he just ever saw the *surban* which felt down to the water, and then it was found that the water changed significantly both taste and colors. Another primary contribution into the development of Islam is the *echoran* rather than their social life.

They then sometimes did *hijrah* (pilgrimage) into Sabah with local natives, and this situation, therefore, is mostly found along the western seas.

This is running during the transit periods of Islam from Brunei, such the ethnic of Brunei Malay, Kedayan and Bisaya into Sabah. This proves by the existence of few prominent people who are family – birth of Brunei, where most of them now still live in Sabah. Similarly, they are believed as the major citizens in those areas such Papar, Sipitang, and Membakut (Muhidin, 1990). The same condition also happened around the north coast of Sabah. The only thing differentiating with the west coast is the moving of some people from Indonesia which is in majority from the ethnic of Bugis and Java. The main purpose of their coming to Sabah is in order to start a new life in Sabah, while at the same time, is to deliver *dakwah* (proselytizing). For this reason, the appearance of outstanding proselytizers such as Mandur Sharif in Ranau, Mandor Asa in Kunak, and Salim Puadok and Haji Shah in Tawau (Hikmah, 1985).

During the same period, furthermore, it contributed to the mobilization of Islamic development is traders who come from the region of Arabs, India, and some others. The knowledge transferred mostly by traders, and knowledge belongs to them. In addition to this, the doctrines which they taught at the period of time, is such reading Holy Qur'an, reading *Barazanji*, and also partly learning about Fiqh and laws of prays, fasting, zakah, hajj, and etc. To be more specific, the more respectable act at the

period was the science of *Qasidah* and *kompang*. Furthermore, the coming keepers from Arabs exchangeably come from century-to-century until the nineteen century. (Awang Sahari, 2003).

The prominent figures among traders who mostly shared their knowledge are those from Sabah, such the death Muhammad Alam from Pakistan, Haji Syah from Java, and Hasan Kubro from the 6<sup>th</sup> Arabs, the datu Agasi from Sulu. They all gave high contribution towards the application and development of Islamic speeches (proselytized) in Sabah, in particular, in Lahad Datu (Hikmah, 1985).

At the first stage of Islam development in Sabah, showed measurable indicators. For this reason, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islam is a big example among the ethnics of Bajau, Brunei, Malay, Idahan, Suluk, Banjar, and few social communities. This happens because the Islamic speech activities before the period were limited in the particular areas such around Sahaja (Muhidin 1982:14). Take for example; it started in Sindumin until Sipitang, and continuously to Karambunai. Those all areas are mostly inhabited by people of Brunei, Kadayan, Bisaya, and Bajau where those areas were under control by the kingdom of Brunei Darussalam before the colonization of United Kingdom, and until now, most of the ethnics are closely relate in family with the people of Brunei (Awang Sahari, 2003).

In the part of Tuaran beach, the city of Belud, kudat, and Teluk merudu until Sandakan where most citizens are Moslems from the tribe of Bajau, Irananun, Suluk, and some others who



most of them have family relations with the citizens of North Philippine. However, along the area of Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna, and Tawau, the Moslems community belong to few tribes, such as Kokos, Bugis, Tidung, Idahan, Bajau, and Suluk as well. For this reason, most of them are very closely related to the family of the North Philippine. (Awang Sahari, 2003)

The main stumbling block existing between the interior and the coast is due to the clergy for the area at the time of the land as it is covered by most of the hills and mountains. This situation makes the growth volume slowly moved somewhat missionary in the region compared with the coast. Another factor is those tribes do not likely depend on the sea as a main source of food storage. So, for them, farming and hunting are the most important, this is because the land is a place where they seek for money. In addition to this, among other things, the area of land used to be a target for pirate attacks. Factors murder and robbery which often occurs in coastal areas also continued to make them think the coast is not safe to live in anymore. Thus, it is not surprising for the tribes. Not only that, the people are very fond of living in the mainland apart from their life as a pagan and practiced animism in their beliefs (and Tom Harison, 1971).

In addition, the stunted development of Islamic propaganda is caused by the existence of communication problems, financial problems, and the lack of freedom of movement, especially during the British colonization. Among the causes of this factor, that was why the development of Islam in

this country is not as good as with the states in Malaya at that time. As already known, the British began colonizing Sabah since 1877. During the period of occupation he reaped riches through the compound Sabah British Borneo (Nik Anuar, 2001). In the colonial period, it was not only the development of the religion of Islam itself stunted, but also the growth of the Muslim community of the social, economic and so on were weak at that time. Tribulation and obstacles during the colonial period were strong enough at that time to lead the deployment which was done secretly and discreetly, as has been described by a fighter and Muslim leaders at the time of British rule until independence; Datuk Haji Mohd. Kassim Haji Hashim. He said that the "fight for the religion of Islam is difficult, must take a variety of difficulties and challenges". Hearts must be strong and have a strong faith. What else in the colonial past. Everything must be done with the chest thumping and self-sacrifice" (Mohammed, 1986).

In fact, the British came to Sabah in particular was not only to invade and take the resources of the country alone, but also to spread the Christianity movement. This is evident by the slogan 3G (Gospel, Gold, Glory) or Gun and poinment according Kosuke Koyama or by 'The Crusader Theory' according Adib Majul. All this clearly shows the principle, how anxious they develop Christianity in the Malay world (Ghazali, 1999). The cunning strategy, furthermore, can be seen with all the effort they want to raise as much as possible and increase the number of Christians and at the same time trying to stop the spread of Islam

continues to grow and spread in the ground state. Movement and efforts towards projecting the image of Islam and was in control, let alone to introduce Islam to the public at that time. The evidence is clear that the British prevent the Muslims migrated to areas of non-Muslims. So do not be surprised and puzzled when the percentage increased in Christian higher than the increase of Muslims (John Whithead, 1893).

Moreover, the persistence and enthusiasm of the first missionaries of Islam cannot be overstated. Even with the limitations and restrictions of the British from all angles so that Islam cannot move and stayed in Sabah, especially the earth, but because of a sense of responsibility The trust as they weather the Islamic remain merely wants to see Islam developed in this country. Motivation and enthusiasm are high enough to encourage preachers to consider all these issues which became a challenge for them. At this context, Aura was born in the spirit of self because they believe that Islam is the only true religion and should be disseminated widely. There are some of them who are willing to through the woods solely to Islamize society in rural areas (and Farid Anwar Fakhri, 2003).

However, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were approximately 20 tribes living in remote areas like Ranau, Keningau, Tambunan, Kiulu and others which all have begun to accept Islam. Ranau which is the placement of people in the interior village is believed to be the first to accept Islam around the year 1940. Among those Ranau first embraced Islam, including

Muhammad Ali bin Kandalis who had embraced Islam on 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1943 and Beringkok bin Haji Daud who had embraced Islam on 10<sup>th</sup> of August 1945. In addition, bin Haji Roman Limbongot and Naiman bin Aru is also among the earliest converts to Islam in Ranau. Their acceptance of Islam is on their awareness of the truth of religion (Muhidin, 1982).

Consciousness is said to arise through their association with the foreman Sharif Muslim. He was nicknamed the "Father of the Old" among people in the hamlet of Ranau. He came to Sabah from Indonesia before the Japanese occupation and during that time he served as foreman estate in Tuaran. Adherents of Islam Sharif Ranau recognize because they worked as a laborer on the estate where the foreman in charge (Muhidin, 1982).

Institutions and the key to the future direction of spreading the teachings of Islam is through the mosque. The role of the mosque is very important and that is where the birth of the student mastered the Qur'an, jurisprudence and so on. For example, Tuanku Said Muhammad has come to Labuan, and he founded a mosque in the village of Coal as a place to teach the teachings of Islam. There he teaches and educates students in a variety of fields including Fiqh 9.

Faith, mysticism and Tafsir al-Quran are among the books that he was used by al-Sabil Muhtadin and Tafsir al-Tarjuman Mustafid Li al-Imam al-QadiNasr al-Din ibn al-Shirazi acid al-Baydawi, translation by Shaykh cAbdul Rauf Cali Fansuri (Mokhtar, 1988 ). Stability in the understanding of Islam as they

make life like as programmed with the new program. The program leads to a life that is more regulated and disciplined as soon as received the creed of Islam as a way of life. Perez Dasmarinan in Carol (1982) states that the public is starting to familiarize themselves with their laws and regulations or the so-called Islamic Hudud law in determining their social life. As described by Perez Dasmarinan.

In order to ensure the continuity of this significant and lasting, the “Ulama” (Islamic scholars) played a major role in the next and Islamize every moment. So it will not return to their home school. These people come from all over the region to take the pain and are willing to leave their homeland simply want to convey the message of Islam to the people. There are some of them who are willing to through the woods alone to Islamize society in rural areas (and Farid Anwar Fakhri, 2003).

There are several prominent scholars who have sacrificed life and property to ensure that it can be developed in the Islamic state like Tuanku Said Muhammad Ibnu Tuanku Said Mohammed Shahabuddin (died 1943M), Haji Muhammad Zaini bin Haji Muhammad Arif Palembang (died 1367H / 1947M), Haji Jacob Haji Ali (1841-1941M), his son Imam Haji Suhaili bin Haji Yaqoub (1918-1985M), and others. Interestingly, they appeared and shined during the reign of England at the end of the 19th century. These figures not only played a role in spreading Islam in the State only, but it has been reaching out to the region in Labuan and Brunei. In addition, scholars of the peninsula as well as Sabah contributed

their knowledge in Sabah in order to uphold the teachings of Islam there. According to Ismail (2001) such as Haji Yusuf Riza bin as acting mufti Sabah, Dato 'Haji Ahmad bin Haji Idris as the State Mufti Haji Ibrahim and Sabah as mufti. If you look at the greatness of figures cleric who was born in the State, it was reckoned not only because of his range in the field of faith and Sufism alone, but it accounts for a Fiqh and space. Not only that, there are also among those who can master the field of metaphysics as Haji Zaini Palembang (& Farid Anwar Fakhri, 2003).

In this period of time, the existence of scholars who really solid in the master of science are extremely rare, especially in the field of interpretation of the Quran, Tajweed, mysticism and so on. Conditions in accordance with the level of society at that time, was still in the early stages to get to know the basic things only. It should continue to teach them a high level is likely they will rebel and see Islam is a religion of distress though Islam is a simple religion practiced according to the nature of human beings. Here lies the wisdom of the scholars in the use of approaches and strategies that are relevant to their happy approach. Therefore, scholars at the time continue to teach of the further basic things such as Islamic law, al-Quran, by prayer, fasting and so on (Norlela, 2002).

After several years of developing and established in the State, the influence of Islam is increasingly becoming a focus among the population in the State before the Islamic religion is

considered strange and new to some people. This arises because they have long life in the atmosphere of animism and paganism faith that has been handed out again. In the meantime, there are some people also know and understand the Christianity of the early to know the religion of Islam. Year after year, the people of Sabah state continues to change as time even before this there was a convert to Islam, but only a few, the sudden increase of the percentage point of Muslims in Sabah from time to time. So, it can be proved by the number of entry of Islam to reach thousands of people in the ceremonies that were held. For example, on February 29, 1980, 4,000 people had embraced Islam in the ceremonies in Kudat (Wisdom, 1980).

A string of ceremonies in Kudat, the application for the religion of Islam and the higher are increasingly in place so have another ceremonies in Keningau on June 21, 1980. The ceremony was held in a total of 855 people of the Murut and Dusun have embraced Islam. This ceremony took place in Dingle in residential Tan Sri Haji Suffian Koroh, who is the Minister of Public Works and Public State. Among those presents were Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Harris Mohd. Salleh and his wife Datin Rufiah Harris, Datuk Hj. Abdul Hamid Goh is the state secretary, Hj. Pawan Chik Zainuddin as federal secretary, Datuk Hj. Abd Mumin Calah as the President of the Islamic Religious Council of Sabah and Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Datin Sri Dr. Hasmah Mohammad Ali (Wisdom, 1980).

## Conclusion

To sum up, proselytizing in Sabah had been through a fairly long process before the emergence of organizations missionary there today. Interestingly, although the state from the point was hilly geographical and political uncertainty, wave propagation can still penetrate the space there. During the efforts carried out by a large enough groups of Sufis, the merchants and the migration of people from outside the state as well as the Brunei Malays from Indonesia such as Bugis.

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