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# THE BORNEO ISLAMIC HERITAGE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IDAHAN JAWI MANUSCRIPT

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## ABSTRACT

Borneo Island is the third largest island in the world, rich in natural resources, biodiversity and cultural diversity. The uniqueness of Borneo is that it is home to three countries; Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, each with their own valuable cultural heritage. One of the unique aspects of the Borneo archipelago is the shared wealth of civilizations derived from the dissemination of Islam. Treasures known as the "Borneo Islamic Heritage" are not only valuable as cultural artefacts that need to be preserved, but they can also be elevated and commercialised as regional economic drivers. This paper discusses the Idahan manuscript written in Jawi script as one of the treasures of Islamic intellectual legacy in Borneo. The method of study is based on content analysis which depicts the descriptive history of the discovery of the Idahan Jawi manuscript. This manuscript not only serves as evidence of the early embrace of Islam in Sabah, but also as a reference to matters pertaining to religion and the laws of Islamic jurisprudence. This factor leads the Idahan community be considered as the first native people embracing Islam at the east coast of Sabah. The contribution of this study is to enhance understanding of the development of Islamic heritage in Borneo Island and to inculcate the spirit of solidarity among the people living in the region.

Keywords: Islamic; Heritage; Idahan; Borneo; Idahan; Jawi; Writing.

## INTRODUCTION

Efforts to preserve the Borneo Islamic Heritage have arguably only been of recent concern in academic discourse. With regards to the studies on Borneo, there have been several researches conducted since the 1940s by Western scholars, especially anthropologists and have been mostly concentrated in Sarawak. King et al. (2017) argued that the study of Borneo can be early traced from the research findings on Iban carried out by George N. Appell and this could provide the basis for a Borneo-wide arrangement of research. The survey proceeds from ethnographic studies which have been conducted since the 1960s-1970s involving several ethnic surveys in Kalimantan (Conley, 1976), Brunei (Brown, 1970), Sabah (Apell, 1960) and Sarawak (Conley, 1973). The 1980s study focused more on policy development issues carried out by local researchers, while research in the 1990s focused on cultural issues and identities involving various themes and disciplines. The research on Borneo has become more specialized through the study of Islam in Sabah when the early spread of Islam at the eastern coast of Sabah has been traceable back to 1408M (Johari, 1998; Mokhtar, 1988; Muhiddin, 1990; Jamdin, 2003; Suraya, 2018). Brunei played an important role in promoting the spread of Islam in Borneo particularly Sarawak which link to the Brunei Sultanate's entry around 1500M and the islands of Maluku (Al-Sufri et al., 2001; Ibrahim, 1998).

Based on this premise, it can be said that the early studies of Borneo's heritage have been of particular interest to Western researchers, especially to those involved in socio-cultural studies conducted through ethnographic approaches. The tendency of Western researchers to carry out research in Borneo is due to the apparent lack of exploration of the island with its uniquely diverse culture emanating from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Although the study of Borneo has long been discussed from various socio-cultural perspectives (and it has been a trend for local researchers to attempt to explain the development of Islam in Sabah and Sarawak), the current study does not emphasize the historical anecdotes of Borneo Islamic Heritage as a bond of cultural unity among the three countries in the Malay archipelago. Instead, this paper aims to shed light on the intellectual legacy of Borneo Islamic Heritage by focusing on the Idahan Jawi manuscript, a relic which provides evidence of the origins of Islam specifically in Sabah.

#### THE BORNEO ISLAMIC HERITAGE

The Borneo Islamic Heritage is a historical legacy that seeks to highlight the privilege this island possess. Beside having this kind of advantage, the island has also been known for several aspects such as the value of harmony in diversity, various local wisdoms and Muslim-friendly tourism-oriented economic potential. For the purpose of writing this paper, the focus of the discussion is on specific aspects of history highlighted through the Idahan Jawi manuscript. This manuscript was selected on the basis that it is written proof of the early founding of Islam in Sabah and one of the most valuable treasures from the Borneo Islands. The presence of this manuscript belonging to one of the Idahan community members in Lahad Datu also indicates their traditonal expertise in in the field of Jawi writing.

The Borneo archipelago is less prominent than it used to be despite its unique privileges. Borneo is one part of the Malay archipelago that embraced Islam without war, but rather as a result of trade activity and inter-marriage (Hamka, 2016; Arnold, 2012). Compared to other regions, such as the continents of South Asia, Central Asia, Africa and Europe or the western world in general, the advent of Islam faced many obstacles and challenges that led to war to defend the purity of the religion and also to liberate humanity from any form of slavery. Arab traders and preachers were the first to spread Islam in Borneo. Prominent Arab individuals such as Pu-Ali (Abu Ali), Sharif Ali, Sharif Awliya Karim al-Makhdum, Sheikh Syamsuddin, Sharif Abdurrahman al-Kadrie (Pontianak) and others (Mohammad, 2011; Hamka, 2016; Muhiddin, 1990); Ismail, 1997) are synonymous with the Islamic development of the island. As a result, there is a Muslim community called "Malai" which arose as a result of inter-marriage within the local community, as well as through their contribution to the construction of Islamic institutions such as mosques and religious schools. It is arguable that inter-marriage was a major factor in the development of Islam in Borneo in the past that continues to this day. However, this factor is discussed in less depth due to the lack of information and studies focussing on Islam in Borneo.

The influence of Islam in Borneo can also be seen in the extent of the Islamic empire under the rule of the Malay sultanate of Brunei, encompassing the Sulu Sultanate, the Sultanate of Sambas, the Pontianak Sultanate and the Sultanate of Banjar Hole-Tarakan (Hamka, 2016; Arnold, 2012; Amin, 2014; Patmawati & Wahida, 2018). The presence of this sultanate that once conquered all and ruled Borneo Island shows that not only has Islamic dominance resulted in a significant historical legacy, it has also left behind treasures of civilization that can be recognized as belonging to the world heritage. However, this empire did not prove to be known as the Melaka Malay Sultanate, the Sultanate of Patani or the Islamic empire in Peninsular Malaysia.

The existence of Islam in Borneo was first detected in Brunei, one of the oldest countries in the Malay archipelago. Suraya (2018) cites a number of historical studies (Cesar, 1973; Fatimi, 1963) which refer to records from the Sung

Dynasty stating that there was a government ruled by Muslims somewhere along the west coast of Sabah. This place was known as Pu-ni in the 10th century. Among other sources, "in 977 the Pu-ni government sent Pu-Ali (Abu Ali) as envoy to China (;). Some historians argue that Pu-ni is another name for Brunei, while others think it is located somewhere else on the west coast of Borneo Island. In Chinese historical records, Brunei is known by the names Po-li, Po-lo, Poni or Puni and Bunlai, while Arabic records say Brunei is known by the name Dzabaj or Randj.

Archaeologically, evidence of Islam's early existence in Brunei comes from the discovery of a tombstone in a cemetery located in Jalan Residency. On the tombstone is written the name of the deceased, Makhdadra binti Ali with the words, Ta, mim of the hijratun of the Prophet Sallah Allah 'alayh wa sallah and at the time, "Sultan Abdul Majid .... son of Muhammad Syahal-Sultan". Based on the date on the tombstone of 440H / 1045M and the sultan's name, it is probable that the people of Brunei embraced Islam earlier than the date suggested in this study (Jamdin 2003). Similarly, a tombstone was found at Rangas cemetery, Bandar Seri Bengawan, Brunei. The inscription is written in Chinese and concerns a Chinese ancestor who is believed to have embraced Islam and died in 1264 (the time of the South Sung Dynasty), called "P'u Kung Chih-mu". If you look at the name "P'u" as described, it comes from the Arabic word meaning Abu. The use of "P'u" refers to Chinese descendents who are Muslim. According to his tombstone, P'u Kung Chih-mu is from Chuan Chou and this reinforces his predictions of his Islam (Muhammad's Intent, 2007). Islamic teachings are said to have spread to the country around the seventh century through Arab traders and preachers. Awang Alak Betatar was the first King of Brunei to convert to Islam in 1368, when he took the title of His Majesty Sultan Muhammad Shah. He is well-known as the founder of the Islamic State in Brunei and Borneo. The Chinese trader who came to Brunei later called him Ma-HaMo-Sha. This prominent sultan died in 1402M.

Through the role of the Brunei Sultanate, Islam began to spread to Sabah, Sarawak and Kalimantan. Records pertaining to the Muslim, Awang Khalak Betatar of Limbang, marks the beginning of Islamic development in Sarawak in 1476M. The past history of Sabah (North Borneo) shows that the Idahan (or Ida'han) was first converted to Islam even before the Malays of Malacca. Based on the manuscript evidence of the Ida'an tribes in Madai, Islam was practiced in the Lahad Datu area from approximately 1408, only eight years after Malacca purportedly opened up in 1400 (Ahmat, 2013). Harrison (1971) argues that the date of Islam's arrival in West Kalimantan and North Kalimantan is not significantly different from Ming's record. His research is based on three sources; first, the manuscript from Sabah; second, Tarsilah Brunei and third, Iban or genealogical studies. The Idahan manuscript is a genealogy dedicated to Abdullah, who was said to be the first convert to Islam in 1408M. Indeed in the Tarsilah Brunei as Harrison argues that the Brunei government had embraced Islam in 1350M. According to him, the Iban people began with Merom Pangai based on the beliefs of the Iban people from western Sarawak. Starting from Merom Pangai in Tusut, the line has persisted for 27 generations. The third generation of Merom Pangai was named Abang Musa, who lived in Sumatra and carried his trading activites as far as Brunei. This proves that Brother Moses lived around 1380M, a date that Harisson identified as "The first significant Muslim impact in Brunei" based on the Brunei idea and Tarsilah manuscript.

#### JAWI WRITING IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO AND BORNEO

Jawi script was introduced from writing letters to spell words in the Malay language of Kawi and Nagari letters then replaced with Arabic letters. The word Jawi is closely related to the Arabs, especially in Mecca amongst the Malays of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. These are the adjectives attributed to the people of Malay origin from Java. The Javanese word is derived from the Arabic word *al-Jawah* that refers to the island of Sumatra, based on Arabic records dating to the middle of the 14th century. This opinion is supported by Ibn Battuta (H.Th., 617) in the first Muslim voyage (1304-1377) that the Jawi script may be associated with the word Java, which is the result of naming the Arabs as people on the island of Sumatra from the Malay community who use Jawi writing on artifacts and in literary works (Berhanundin et al., 2012).

Thus, the Jawi script was said by the Arabs to refer to the letters and spellings used by those on the Muslim Malay Archipelago and speaking the Malay language. Jawi writing had been introduced by Muslim missionaries to enable members of Malay society to read the Quran correctly as it refers to the correct Malay adjustable language by using the Arabic terms for certain words as well as those used in the study of various fields of science. In other words, Jawi is a script introduced by Arab preachers which resembles Arabic writing. It is believed that the Malays received instruction in Jawi script directly from the Arabs. The Arabs began to use this text to write a new version of Malay known as Jawi. According to findings on the early history of Jawi in Terengganu, the Malays are thought to have been using Jawi writing in religious studies since 1303.

Jawi writing is a valuable addition to Malay heritage. It has played an important role in the development of knowledge and specifically the Malay

culture. Various fields of knowledge, such as Islamic studies, history and medicine have been written about in the Malay language using Jawi script. The Malays highly regard Jawi writing as it is a gateway to the understanding of Islam and its holy book, the Quran. The uses of Jawi is one of the main factors contributing to the rise of the Malay language as a regional language in addition to the spread of Islam. Jawi has been widely used in the sultanates of Malacca, Johor, Brunei, Sulu, Patani, Aceh and Ternate since the 15<sup>th</sup> century for royal correspondence, creature-order, poetry and also as the main means of communication among merchants at the port of Malacca. An overview of ancient jurisprudence shows that the laws of Malacca, Johor, Pahang, Kedah and Brunei are all written in Jawi script (Abd. Jalil, 2012).

According to the historical literature on the development of Islam, the Idahan manuscript was the first text found in Sabah to use the Jawi script. It has been a major source of evidence of early Islamic dissemination in Sabah since the 13th century (1408 AD). The manuscript is also one of the most important forms of heritage not only to the Idahan people, but to the whole Muslim community in Sabah. This manuscript is considered important because it has played a role in preserving the heritage of Borneo and Sabah's Islamic heritage.

#### THE IDAHAN MANUSCRIPT

The Idahan is an ethnic group residing in the Lahad Datu district in a region stretching from the Kinabatangan River to Sandakan (Jusman 2016). Idahan or Ida'an is a term used by outsiders to refer to the indigenous people or native people who inhabit the Borneo Islands. Shim (2007) considers the Ida'an to be the first group to migrate from Nunuk Ragang (with the Dusunik and Paitanik groups) before moving on to Kinabatangan and finally settling in the Gulf of Darvel. Shim (2007) estimates the date of arrival of the Ida'an to have been around 1200M, while their move to the new settlement in Darvel Bay, is considered to have been around 1300M. These estimates are based on a mythical story that briefly summarizes the history of the Ida'an ancestors as recorded in the Ida'an manuscript. This theory contradicts Idahan oral records which claim that the in-fighting began in the Tingkayu valley, located between the Kunak and Lahad Datu border.

At present, the Idahan people live in several villages located in the vicinity of Lahad Datu. Their main settlement is Sapagaya Village situated 10 kilometers from Lahad Datu city. The Lahad Datu district is on the East Coast of Sabah under the Tawau Residency bordering the Kunak and Kinabatangan districts. With an area of about 2,510 sq km, the district has 199,830 residents based on the 2010 census.



Map of Lahad Datu District

When the British took control of the Darvel Bay area, the Idahan people were divided into groups of large families and placed in new settlements. These include Binuang Village, Segangan Village, Bikang Village, Tabanak Village and Segama Village (Jusman, 2012). It is believed this break-up was facilitated to allow the British to monitor and control the locals more easily.

# THE IDAHAN MANUSCRIPT IN JAWI AS BORNEO'S ISLAMIC HERITAGE

The original manuscript of the Idahan tribe is believed to have been written after the coronation of Abdullah in the 15th century. While the manuscript is still preserved by his heir it is only a copy of the original. Based on water marks on this manuscript it is believed to have been written around the 1880s. It contains 140 pages some of which have been damaged by age. The manuscript was written using a bamboo pen and black ink which is now fading. At this time the manuscript is still kept by the current heir, Haji Imam Injir bin Panjang, who believes that part of the Idahan genealogy and records have been preserved for the next generation of Idahan writers (Suwaid, 1988).

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Idahan Manuscript in Jawi Writing

This text is also believed to have been used as a religious book since it contains principles of faith (aqidah) and Islamic jurisprudence (Feqah), and at the time of writing there were no printed books on Islam. According to the owners, the contents of this document are divided into Islamic teachings and matters pertaining to everyday life. From the final clauses of this document it appears that the practice of animism gradually diminished due to the influence of Islam through prayer and matters of faith such as calling to Allah. Matters relating to Islamic teachings in these final clauses are believed to have been communicated by external preachers and were added later to the document.

The handwritten Jawi manuscript represents an important genealogy of the Idahan tribe in Sabah. Although it is primitive in nature and a copy of the original document, it is still nevertheless a very valuable source of pre-Muslim chronicles. The document reveals how the Idahan people converted to Islam from animism over several decades. The contents in this section can be divided into two sections:

 Ten generations (descendants) before Islam. Abdullah was the first convert to Islam. The names of such individuals from one generation to the next are recorded, as well as magical events shaped and influenced by the religious influence of Hinduism, such as myths relating to eagles, golden deer and magical dogs. 2. Six to ten generations after Abdullah. This document records that Abdullah embraced Islam in 1408M.

In other genealogical studies, it can be generally assumed that each generation or line of descent is an average of 25 years. Then we will find:

Based on the above assumptions, we can say that the year 1150M was the earliest date at which the Idahan community was ready to accept a new teaching or faith, namely Islam. They embraced Islam due to the influence of Abdullah and to this day he is considered a guardian. Abdullah was converted to Islam in 1408M after being Islamized in the Gulf of Darvel by Sharif Karim Aulia Makhdum of Sulu, and he was clearly a prominent individual according to the document. Thus, based on the evidence of the manuscript, it is believed that Islam was established as a religion on the east coast of Sabah in the early 15th century.

The discovery of an Idahan manuscript in Jawi script owned by an Idahan family in Lahad Datu district was highlighted by Harrison & Harrison (1971) when conducting a prehistoric study in Sabah to uncover the story of Abdullah and the Idahan people as the first natives to embrace Islam. Although some of its content is primitive, its origin is clearly not contaminated by any element of addition. It also contains a very valuable pre-Islamic chronicle as well as Idahan genealogical records covering about 25 generations. The manuscript not only relates decades of conversion to Islam from animism (and even there the content is written using Jawi in Malay), but also serves as the reference book of religious affairs and Islamic jurisprudence (Suwayd, 1988). This manuscript is believed to have been copied several times since it was first written. The Muslim preacher or imam would have been responsible for this manuscript and would have usually taken the initiative to copy faded or worn parts to ensure that their contents were always preserved (Harrison & Harrison, 1988).

The roles of the copyist, translator and owner of the manuscript were important as they were responsible as the heirs and disseminators of knowledge. Based on the researcher's observations, the first manuscript was written in the Idahan language using Jawi script, while the second manuscript was recorded in the Malay language. The first part was probably carried by the preacher who claimed to be Abdullah, whereas the second was believed to have been carried out by outside preachers who came to the Darvel Bay area and copied it immediately from the manuscript owner (Suwaid, 1988). No mention of the author's name or date is to be found in the entire manuscript. However, it is the nature of Malay manuscripts driven by the Malay community to be heavily influenced by Islamic values such as humility or humbleness (*tawadu*'), which govern their writing practice (Amin, 1980). Therefore, it is not surprising that this manuscript does not mention any author's name because the main purpose of writing was to record and pass on the knowledge to the next generation. Harrison & Harrison's (1988) study divided the content of the manuscript into three parts:

- 1. Information on paddy cultivation and other crops and astrological observations.
- 2. The story of idols that led to accounts of several generations of Idahan.
- 3. Information on Islamic teachings copied from various sources.

The discovery of this Idahan manuscript not only reflects the existence of the Muslim community on the east coast of Sabah but also reflects its commitment to the Islamic teachings. It also shows the capability of the Idahan people in terms of Jawi writing, as evidenced by the fact that they managed to write the manuscript using the local language of Idahan. Such a process must have been a slow and painstaking one. This further supports the opinion that the Islamic teachings have long been accepted by the Idahan people.

In addition, there are other manuscripts of the book of feqah written based on the translation of the feqah scriptures in Arabic. The content is written in Jawi and an Arabic translation of a book published in Hadramaut in the early 14th century. While the author's name is not stated, the manuscript is believed to have been written by Muslim preachers who came to Darvel Bay area from Sulu. The existence of these two manuscripts seems to be sufficient proof of the early emergence and development of Islam on the east coast of Sabah, and the practice of its teachings by locals. The arrival of the preacher from Sulu illustrates the ongoing process of preaching and scholarly activity in the area, especially in relation to Islamic teachings. The number of Idahan converts to Islam at this time is uncertain, but the study does not rule out the idea of conversion in phases, as is evidenced elsewhere in the archipelago.

The arrival of the Sulu Datu in the Darvel Bay area in the 17th century was significant, as not only did they dominate trade, but they also brought with them a religious mission. It is likely that the arrival of the people from Sulu marked the second phase of Islamic development on the east coast of Sabah. Unity is a term derived from the title Datu, and one that originated in the Sulu archipelago located in the southern Philippines.

The spirit of leadership of the sultan and the Datu, who always adhered to Islamic values led to good relations with foreign communities including those in North Borneo. Some of these can be seen in Tom and Barbara Harrison's (1971) article in *The Prehistory of Sabah* which speaks of the friendship between the Suluk and Idahan that dates back to the 17th century. In fact, this good relationship is said to have been established during the Islamic conversion of the Idahan people, long associated with the Sulu. Mutalib M.D. (1995) argues that if the relationship between the two groups had never occurred, the Idahans would have retained their animist beliefs to this day. The string of religious interactions led to significant trade relations between the two to the extent that Idahan are now strongly bonded to the people from the Sulu archipelago, especially through mixed marriages. In the Gulf of Darvel, it is believed that marriage to a local will imbue the spouse with special powers over areas where birds choose to nest.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that the legacy of Borneo Islamic Heritage has been realized through the discovery of an old Idahan manuscript in Sabah which constitutes a cultural treasure of considerable historical importance. Jawi writing has played a significant role in the accumulation of Malay heritage and specifically in the development of Malay culture across various disciplines. This Jawi-scripted Idahan manuscript is important because it has bolstered and strengthened both the heritages of Borneo and Islam in Sabah. Furthermore, the manuscript has the potential to be a catalyst for the continued preservation of local wisdom. In fact, the description of Borneo's Islamic Heritage also reveals the bond of cultural unity among the three countries which form the Borneo archipelago: all embraced Islam not as a result of war, but through trade, religious teaching and intermarriage. It is hoped that this research will enhance understanding of the development of the rich Islamic heritage to be found in the Borneo region. Further study needs to be carried out to provide greater insights into this valuable heritage, the source of which will be local knowledge and wisdom acquired through the ages.

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