

## THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE ISLAMIC KINGDOM OF MALACCA IN EXPANDING ISLAM AND TRADE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

**Ripi Hamdani**

Postgraduate Student of Islamic Studies, Ar-Raniry State Islamic University

✉ [corresponding: ripihamdani0801@gmail.com](mailto:ripihamdani0801@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

The Islamic Kingdom of Malacca was one of the most influential political and religious entities in Southeast Asian history during 15th and early 16th centuries. Founded around 1400 AD, the Kingdom developed a center of political and administrative power and became an important node in the international maritime trade network connecting the Eastern and Western worlds. Its strategic location on the strait of Malacca, the main shipping route from Indian Ocean to South China Sea, made Malacca a vital stopover for traders from various regions, such as the Middle East, Persia, Gujarat, China and the Archipelago. This trade relation created an exchange of goods and encouraged cultural and religious exchanges, including the expansion of Islam. In the context of the expansion of Islam, the Kingdom of Malacca played a very central role. Muslim traders who came to Malacca often also acted as preachers, who, through social interaction, marriage and fostering local Muslim communities, spread Islam peacefully. This factor was reinforced by the support of the sultans of Malacca who embraced Islam and made the religion the basis of legitimizing power as well as a pillar in shaping the cultural and legal identity of the Kingdom. The Islamic government system adopted by Malacca used as a model for other Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago, such as Aceh Darussalam, Demak, and Johor. Moreover, Malacca was also known as a center of Islamic education, where Islamic sciences such as fiqh, sufism, and tafsir were studied and disseminated. This journal aims to comprehensively examine the history and strategic role of the Islamic Kingdom of Malacca in the Islamization process of Southeast Asia. The discussion covers political, economic, socio-cultural aspects, Islamic preaching, and the legacy of civilization that still feels its influence today. With a historical approach and thematic analysis, this paper is expected to contribute to understanding the dynamics of the spread of Islam in this region.

**Keywords:** Malacca, Islam, Da'wah, Civilization, Southeast Asia

### INTRODUCTION

The history of the entry and development of Islam in Southeast Asia is a long, dynamic and complex process which cannot be separated from the role of Muslim traders and the support of the local kingdoms (rulers) those accepted and spread the teachings of Islam. These processes

were not the result of military conquest as happened in other regions, but through meaningful and peaceful means such as trade, marriage, education, and cultural assimilations. In this context, the Sultanate of Malacca was had important position as one of the pioneers in integrating Islam into the socio-political and cultural order of Southeast Asian society.

The Sultanate of Malacca was founded around 1400 AD by Parameswara, a prince from Palembang who later converted into Islam and took the name Sultan Iskandar Syah. As the port city of Malacca grew into a center of international maritime trade, the teachings of Islam spread widely and quickly in the surrounding area. The presence of Muslim traders from Arabia, Persia, Gujarat and South India who routinely stopped over and traded in Malacca also strengthened the above process. They brought merchandise while extending Islamic values through proselytization and social interaction. In a relatively short period of time, Malacca grew into an important center for the spread of Islam and had a wide influence throughout the archipelago.

Apart from its strategic location on the international shipping route of the Malacca Strait, Malacca's success in spreading Islam was also influenced by the policies of the sultans who supported the enlargement of this religion. Islam became the basis of the kingdom's laws, education system, and cultural identity. The development of religious institutions, such as madrasas and sharia-based courts, reflected the integration of political structures and Islamic values. Malacca's role in spreading Islam continued even after the kingdom declined due to Portuguese colonization in the early 16th century.

This research aims to explore the factors that made the Sultanate of Malacca the center of advanced Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia. Using a historical approach and thematic analysis, this study discussed the Malacca's strategic role in the Islamization process, the Islamicbased government system, relations between nations through trade routes, and its contribution in shaping Islamic identity in the archipelago. Understanding Malacca's important role in the history of Islam in the region is important for the reconstruction of local history, beside for understanding the dynamics of the spread of global Islam in a broader context.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, which collects data from various literatures such as history books, scientific articles, and academic journals relevant to the topic of the Sultanate of Malacca. The data is analyzed descriptively by emphasizing the historical aspects, the role of da'wah, the government system, and the contribution of Islamic civilization left by the kingdom. This approach allows the author to deeply understand the transformation process of Malacca into the center of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia and trace its impact on the development of Islam in the archipelago.

## DISCUSSION

### A. History of the founding of the Kingdom of Malacca

The Kingdom of Malacca was founded around 1400 AD by Parameswara, a prince from the Sriwijaya Kingdom who fled to Malacca after his kingdom fell to Majapahit. Parameswara initially ruled Palembang, but after Majapahit succeeded in controlling the region, he looked for a new place to establish new kingdom. He chose a very strategic area, located on the coast of the Straits of Malacca, which was a major trade route between India and China. This geographical position gave Malacca a great advantage as it was a crossroads of world shipping routes that connecting traders from different parts of the world. This allowed Malacca to develop rapidly into one of the most important maritime kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Parameswara's success in establishing a kingdom in this region was also driven by his political prowess in building relationships with various parties that came through the trade route.<sup>1</sup>

After establishing a new kingdom in Malacca, Parameswara decided to convert into Islam, which became an important turning point in Malacca's history. As a newly converted sultan, he changed his name to Sultan Iskandar Shah. This change was not just symbolic, but

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<sup>1</sup> Azra, Azyumardi, "*The Ulama Network: Islamic Reform in Indonesia 1900-2000*", Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2000, pp. 15.

also as signal of his acceptance of Islam as the state religion. Sultan Iskandar Shah's decision to embrace Islam had a huge impact on the development of the Malacca Kingdom. Muslim traders who came through international trade routes also introduced Islam to the local population. Most of Malacca residents eventually embraced Islam, and the kingdom turned to be a very important center of Islamization in Southeast Asia. This acceptance of Islam also strengthened Malacca's diplomatic relations with Islamic countries in the Middle East and India, and strengthened its political position in the region.<sup>2</sup>

The development of Malacca as the center of Islamic civilization is inseparable from the advantageous geographical factors, namely Malacca's location in the middle of the international trade route connecting the Middle East, India and China. The Malacca Strait became a very busy shipping lane, traversed by ships from all over the world. Malacca's presence on this shipping route enabled the kingdom to develop its economy through trade in goods such as spices, gold and other crops. In addition, the diversity of cultures and religions that entered Malacca through trade routes also enriched the kingdom's social and cultural life. Traders from India, the Middle East and China not only brought merchandise, but also influenced the local way of life. This caused Malacca to develop into a trading center that not only offered commodities, but also new ideologies and values, including Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from trade, Sultan Iskandar Shah's government policy of adopting Islam as the foundation of the state was also a major factor in Malacca's success. Sultan Iskandar Shah set up a centralized and strong government structure, with himself as the sultan who held full authority in political, social and religious affairs. The success of this government was inseparable from the role of ulama and scholars who were included in the government. The ulama played an important role in advising the sultan on religious and legal matters, and in proselytizing Islam among the people. In addition, the legal system implemented in Malacca was based on Islamic sharia, which provided a strong moral and legal basis for government

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<sup>2</sup> Mulkhan, Mohammad, *"Islam and Politics: A History of Islam in Indonesia"*, LP3ES, 1994, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Mulyadi, A., *"History of Trade in Southeast Asia"*, Pustaka Pelajar, 2005, pp. 103

and public life. Courts administered according to Islamic principles also emphasized Malacca's identity as an Islamic kingdom that adhered to religious law.<sup>4</sup>

## **B. The Government Structure and Social System**

The Malacca Sultanate's system of government was a centralized form of Islamic monarchy with the Sultan as the head of the state and the head of the religion. The Sultan is the highest political power holder and the spiritual symbol that were widely recognized by the people and religious leaders. In the context of Islamic governance, the Sultan was seen as having the mandate to uphold justice, implement sharia law, and maintain order and public welfare. The Sultan's power is based on Islamic principles, such as deliberation (shura) in decision-making, and the leader is considered a servant of the people, not an absolute ruler in the secular sense. This government structure combined Islamic values with tradisional elements of Malay customs, making it unique and adaptive to Malacca's plural social environment.<sup>5</sup>

The government was run in a structured manner with a clear division of tasks through specific institutions and positions. One of the key positions was the Treasurer, who functioned as the prime minister and right-hand man of the Sultan. The Treasurer was in charge of organizing the state administration, managing the budget and trade proceeds, and mediating diplomatic affairs. His position was very strategic, as he often represented the Sultan in state affairs, especially when the Sultan was absent or outside the royal center. The Treasurer also had great influence in the appointment of other royal officials and the day-to-day running of the government.

In addition to Bendahara, there was Laksamana, a high-ranking official who took lead the navy. The Admiral's role was vital given Malacca's location as an important port on the international trade route. His main task was to keep the sea safe from pirates and foreign

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<sup>4</sup> Sudiarja, J., "*History of the Kingdoms of the Archipelago*", Gramedia, 2006, pp. 110.

<sup>5</sup> A. Hashmi, "*History of the Entry and Development of Islam in Indonesia*", Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1993, pp. 108.

enemies, as well as escorting merchant ships in and out of the port. The admiral also spearheaded marine military expeditions and represented the military power of the Sultanate of Malacca in Nusantara waters. This defense system shows how important maritime power was in Malacca's system of government, which was oriented towards sea-based political and economic stability.

The next important position is Temenggung, the official responsible for internal security and the implementation of the law. The Temenggung led the law enforcement apparatus and in charge of upholding public order, quelling internal conflicts and resolving disputes amongst citizens. He was also responsible for market supervision and the direct implementation of customary law and sharia in the community. This security system showed that Malacca's government structure was not only upward-oriented (the kingdom), but also paid attention to social aspects and stability at the grassroots level, ensuring that there was no oppression and lawlessness that disturbed the public order.

On the social side, Malacca's society consists of various ethnicities those coexist peacefully and mutually beneficially. The main communities include Malays, Arabs, Persians, Gujaratis (Indians), and Chinese. Despite coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds, these groups could live in the harmony due to an inclusive social system and the government's transparency in accommodating the diversity. The government provided space for traders and migrants to live, trade and even participate in socio-political activities, as long as they abided by the law and paid taxes. The sultanate did not impose cultural assimilation, but encouraged social integration through the use of the Malay language and the application of a fair legal system. This pattern reflected Islamic values of social justice and respect for differences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A. Wahid Hasbullah, *"Islamic Law and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia"*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2001, pp. 90-91.

### C. The Malacca's Role in the Spread of Islam

The Sultanate of Malacca played a very important role as the center of the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, especially in the 15th to early 16th centuries. Its strategic location on international trade routes made it a meeting point for Muslim merchants from various regions such as Arabia, Persia, Gujarat and South Asia. These Muslim traders not only brought trade commodities, but also spread Islamic values to the archipelago. Trade became a very effective means of proselytizing because it involved intense social and economic interaction with local communities. In this process, Islam was introduced gradually, through daily life practices that reflected Islamic morals and ethics.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of foreign and domestic scholars helped strengthen Malacca's position as a center of knowledge and religious propagation. These scholars settled in Malacca and established educational institutions such as surau and madrasas, where people could learn the basics of Islam, from tawhid to fiqh and tasawwuf. Teaching was conducted in Malay and written in the Jawi script, making Islamic teachings easily accessible to the local community. The Jawi script, which is an adaptation of Arabic letters, became an important tool in widely distributing Islamic knowledge, whether in the form of books, letters, or da'wah poems. One of the main strengths of the spread of Islam in Malacca was its peaceful and accommodating approach to local culture. Islam was not spread coercively, but through a cultural approach that respected the customs of the Malay community.

For example, in marriage ceremonies, inheritance laws, or local leadership systems, Islamic teachings were introduced by adjusting elements of sharia within the framework of prevailing customs. This approach was very effective as it created a high sense of acceptance among the community. Islam was accepted not as a foreign force, but as part of their daily lives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. Hasymy, "*History of Entry and.....*" pp. 112-113.

<sup>8</sup> Hamka, *History of the Muslim Ummah*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1981, pp. 203-205. <sup>9</sup> A. Hashmi, *History of Entry and.....* hlm. 116-118.

From Malacca, the teachings of Islam then spread to various surrounding areas, including Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, to the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. This spread occurred through two main channels: first, the inter-port trade route, where Muslim traders spread the teachings of Islam while trading to various islands and other ports; second, through the intellectual and da'wah route of scholars who traveled to preach or settled in new areas. Some ulama even married locals and established Muslim communities in new places. This strengthened the presence of Islam in these areas and made Malacca the starting point for the spread of Islam with wide influence.

With its central role, Malacca became the political and economic center and the spiritual and intellectual center of the Malay-Islamic world. Malacca's strength in spreading Islam lay in its ability to integrate religious teachings with local social and cultural systems, thus making it a model of peaceful, inclusive and sustainable Islamic propagation. This legacy continued even after Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511. Many Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago later followed Malacca's lead in terms of Islamic-based governance and its gentle yet powerful proselytization system.

#### **D. The Islamic Cultural and Intellectual Heritage**

The strong influence of Islam in the Sultanate of Malacca clearly reflected on various aspects of life, culture, architecture, literature, and legal system. One of the most striking cultural legacy is the construction of mosques with typical Malay-Islamic architecture. Mosques in Malacca, such as the Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah Mosque, have designs that combine local elements with typical Islamic architectural features, such as large domes and minarets. These designs illustrate the harmonious blend of Islamic traditions brought by outside traders and preexisting Malay cultural values. These mosques are places of worship and centers of social, educational and da'wah activities. The existence of these mosques also shows how Islam played the role as a trigger of social and cultural renewal in Malacca.<sup>9</sup>



Apart from architecture, the Jawi script played an important role in the intellectual development of Malacca. The Jawi script was an adaptation of the Arabic alphabet used to write the Malay language, and it grew to the main means of spreading science and religion. Through the Jawi script, many written works were produced, both in the form of religious texts, literature, and general science. These writings became teaching materials in educational institutions established by scholars in Malacca. The Jawi script enabled the Malay community to access Islamic literature written in their own language, thus accelerating the process of spreading the teachings of Islam to a wider audience. These works were also a way to integrate Islamic teachings into local Malay traditions.

In terms of law, Islamic sharia was applied in the daily life of the Malacca Kingdom and society, integrating religious teachings into the existing customary legal system. Sharia courts were established to resolve various case law, whether related to family, inheritance and trade. The application of sharia in royal law impacted the social order and showed how important religion was in creating justice and stability in the society. The Sultan of Malacca, as head of state and head of religion affairs, had an obligation to uphold Islamic sharia in all aspects of his people's lives which reinforced the role of Islam in Malacca's social and political life.

In addition, Malacca's heyday was also known for the emergence of various intellectual works related to fiqh, tasawwuf, and tawhid. Many scholars wrote important books on the basic principles of Islamic teachings, providing people with extensive knowledge on how to live in accordance with religious guidance. These works also illustrated the effort to harmonize Islamic teachings with the social, cultural and economic context in Malacca. Some of the works produced during this period are still important references in the world of Islamic thought in Southeast Asia, proving that Malacca was not only a trading center, but also an intellectual center that gave birth to leading Islamic thinkers.

The cultural and intellectual influence of Islam in Malacca covered the aspects of judiciary, literary, and education. The educational institutions that flourished in Malacca, such as madrassas and surau, became centers of knowledge that explored both religious and world

sciences. Here, students learned about religious teachings, astronomy, mathematics and other sciences those delivered in Malay using the Jawi script. This learning fostered a deep intellectual tradition and became an important foundation in the development of Islamic thought throughout Southeast Asia. Thus, Malacca was known as a center of economy and trade activities as well as one of the greatest intellectual center that influenced the Southeast Asian region.<sup>9</sup>

### **E. The Strategic Role in Trade**

The Sultanate of Malacca developed as a very important international trade center due to its strategic location in the Strait of Malacca. This route became a vital link between East and West, so the port of Malacca turned to be a stopover for merchant ships from various regions such as China, India, Arabia and East Africa. The Sultanate of Malacca capitalized on this position by creating a maritime governance system that ensured maritime security and port order. With a fair customs system and legal protection for foreign traders, Malacca became a highly desirable trading port. Merchants from various nations felt safe and comfortable trading in the region, and this strengthened Malacca's position in the world trade network in the 15th century.

Sultan Mansyur Syah, one of the great rulers of Malacca, established trade policies that encouraged rapid economic growth. He established the position of syahbandar to regulate trade based on the origin of the traders such as syahbandar for Gujarat, China and Arabia, showing the sophistication of the trade administration system at that time. Commodities such as spices from the Moluccas, gold from Sumatra and ceramics from China were traded in Malacca, making it a vibrant and dynamic international market. Trade not only brought wealth, but also strengthened Malacca's position as a powerful and politically and economically organized Islamic maritime state.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hamka, *History of the Muslim Ummah*....., pp. 210-213.

<sup>10</sup> Azra, Azyumardi. "Network of Middle Eastern and Archipelago Scholars in the XVII & XVIII Centuries." Jakarta: Kencana, 2004, pp. 45-48.

This strategic role was also supported by the Sultanate of Malacca's ability to become a distribution node for goods from the East and West. Products from the archipelago such as pepper, nutmeg and cloves were channeled to India and the Middle East through Malacca, while external goods such as cloth and precious metals entered through the same route. These trade interactions were not only economically valuable, but also strengthened cultural exchanges and accelerated the spread of Islam. Through their economic activities, Muslim traders also became agents of da'wah, spreading Islamic values peacefully in the midst of cosmopolitan port life.

In this context, trade activities in Malacca did not stand alone, but they were integrated with political policies and religious activities. The Sultanate of Malacca became a cosmopolitan port that was not only economically oriented, but also showed an adaptive and open face of Islam towards various nations. This made Malacca not just a trading city, but a symbol of the success of maritime Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia. This success then became a model for other kingdoms in the region, such as Aceh and Johor, in building maritime-based trade and proselytization networks.<sup>11</sup>

#### **F. The collapse of the Kingdom of Malacca**

The heyday of the Sultanate of Malacca ended in 1511 when the Portuguese led by Afonso de Albuquerque conquered this strategic port city. The invasion was triggered by the Portuguese ambition to control the lucrative spice trade route in Southeast Asia. After defeating the Malacca forces, the Portuguese established a fort in the city and controlled Malacca as part of their colonial empire. The fall of Malacca was a pivotal turning point in Southeast Asian history, as it ended Malacca's reign as a center of international trade and a hub port for the spread of Islam in the region. The fall of Malacca also showed how European colonial powers began to take control of the maritime trade previously controlled by Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>11</sup> Saepudin, Dadan. "Islamization Through Trade Routes in the Strait of Malacca Region." *Journal of Tamaddun*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 71-78.

The main cause of Malacca's downfall was Portuguese attacks, but internal factors also played a role. Internal tensions between the royal elites and different interests in managing the kingdom constituted the causes that weakened Malacca. Although Malacca had a great maritime power, the centralized government structure under the Sultan made the kingdom vulnerable to external attacks. In addition, rivalries between major powers like Malacca and other kingdoms in the region such as Majapahit, Siam and Aceh also created instability that worsened Malacca's condition. Once the Portuguese gained control of Malacca, they immediately changed trade policies and hindered the spread of Islam, which had been thriving in the port city.<sup>12</sup>

Colonization by the Portuguese caused a shift in the center of Islamic power in Southeast Asia. The Kingdom of Johor, located across the Straits of Malacca, immediately took over as Malacca's political successor. The kingdom, led by the descendants of the Sultan of Malacca, continued Malacca's tradition of ruling by Islamic principles, albeit in the face of great challenges from the dominance of the Portuguese who remained in control of Malacca. Besides Johor, other kingdoms such as Aceh in Sumatra also became center of resistance to Portuguese rule. Aceh, which in the 16th century was rapidly developing as the center of Islamic power in Southeast Asia, was the last bastion of Islamic influence in the region previously controlled by Malacca. Therefore, despite the fall of Malacca, Islam remained widespread in the region since the continuation of its successor kingdoms.

Although Malacca fell to the Portuguese, the Islamic intellectual and cultural heritage that had flourished in the city survived. Muslim scholars and traders who had previously settled in Malacca not only fled to other areas, but they also continued to spread the teachings of Islam to various regions. Other port cities such as Johor, Aceh and Banten emerged as the new centers for Islamic preaching. In Aceh, for example, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam played a great role in continuing the scholarly tradition that had previously developed in Malacca, including in the fields of fiqh, Sufism and Islamic history. In this case, although Malacca fell politically,

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<sup>12</sup> A. Wahid Hasbullah, "*Islamic Law and.....*hlm. 114-116.

culturally and intellectually, but its Islamic heritages continued and developed in the era of successor kingdoms that retained Islamic values.

Eventually, Malacca's demise marked a major change in the political and social landscape of Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to the spread of Islam. However, the legacies left by Malacca, be it religious, cultural or intellectual, did not disappear. The Sultanate of Malacca might have collapsed, but its influence lives on through successor kingdoms, such as Johor and Aceh, which successfully continued the Islamic intellectual and cultural traditions. On the other hand, although the Portuguese controlled Malacca's main port, it was unable to completely eliminate Islamic influence in the region which continued to thrive despite external and internal pressures.<sup>13</sup>

### **G. The Relevance of Malacca History in the Study of Islamic Civilization**

The Sultanate of Malacca is a clear example of the successful integration of Islam with local culture in Southeast Asia. Malacca, as a center of international trade involving various ethnicities and cultures, was able to adapt the teachings of Islam to local Malay traditions. This success was reflected in the acceptance of Islam by the people and in the way Islam was practiced in the daily peaceful and inclusive manner. Malacca resulted in a model for the rest of Southeast Asia on how religious teachings could be accepted and developed without losing local cultural identity. The ethnic diversity that coexists in Malacca proves that Islam in this region could adapt well to various social and cultural contexts.<sup>14</sup>

The history of Malacca provides important lessons on effective ways of proselytizing, which relied on religious approaches as well as on social and economic approaches. Muslim scholars and traders who came to Malacca played a major role in spreading the teachings of Islam through trade interactions that benefited both parties. Da'wah done in this way created a

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<sup>13</sup> Hamka, "*History of the Muslim Ummah*" ..... pp. 215-218.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad, Hidayat. "The Role of the Sultanate of Malacca in the Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia," *Journal of History and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, pp. 115-123.

mutually beneficial relationship between the parties involved, and reduced the resistance of the local people to the new teachings. Through this trade and social relationship, Islam spread widely across the region, even after the fall of Malacca in 1511.

In the context of Islamic civilization, Malacca had confirmed Southeast Asia's position as an integral part of the Islamic world network. Malacca was a center of trade beside a center for the spread of Islamic knowledge. Its existence as an international trade center allowed Malacca to connect with various regions of the Islamic world, from the Middle East to India and China. Through these connections, the Islamic civilization in Malacca gained influence from the wider Islamic intellectual tradition and enriched the treasures of Islamic science and culture in Southeast Asia. Thus, the history of Malacca remains relevant in current study of Islamic civilization, as it illustrates how Islam puts a link between local cultures and foreign countries in the global Islamic network.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Safrudin, Mohammad. "Malacca and the Network of Islamic Civilization in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Islamic Studies Nusantara*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2018, pp. 67-74.

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