

Interreligious Encounters and the Making of the Nusantara Civilization: A Comparative Reflection on Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract: This paper examines how interreligious encounters shaped the Nusantara civilization through dialogue and adaptation of Islam with the beliefs that have existed before it. This research uses a qualitative and comparative approach, by studying how syncretism of religious values and cultural practices produced a pattern of religiosity which are moderate, inclusive, and related to local wisdom. This paper analyses two countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, as two inheritors of the same civilizational legacy even though they both use different ways in practicing pluralism. While Indonesia manages pluralism through Pancasila, Malaysia applied pluralism by integrating Islam in its constitution. The results show that the spirit of pluralism and religious moderation in the region is not an influence from external sources but it is an original expression of the Nusantara's civilizational heritage which uses dialogue and humanity in their daily interaction.

Keyword : *Interreligious, Nusantara, Syncretism, Pluralism*

Introduction

The story of Nusantara is about the encounter among humans, beliefs, and the world which shaped each other's characteristics through the time. Far before the existence of what-so-called 'countries-state', the archipelago has been the lived maritime track and space for cultural exchanges where traders, monks, and mystics come not only for good trading but also sharing their ideas, listening and learning. At that time, the sea did not become something that separated them, in contrast, it became a bridge that connected them. In that shared space, what we identified as 'religion' did not come to conquer the area. Instead, religion arrived to have dialogues and led the cosmological encounter between indigenous beliefs, and/or Hindu-Buddhism tradition, then Islam. They all co-existed and lived in peace,

resulting in a cultural synthesis that was fluid, dialogical, and humanistic.

The meeting of the traditions created what we called 'spiritual grammar' which was unique for the Nusantara. In this context, 'Nusantara' became a term that defined the way of practicing religion which respects harmony instead of confrontation, continuity over division, adaptation over absolutism. This spiritual heritage in this area was never about a rigid practice of dogma but to embrace the moral of co-existence among them. When Islam arrived, it entered the region not as a force to diminish the existence tradition, but as a bridge to give new vitality for local wisdom. Setiawan and Stevanus explained in their writing that Islamic values gave examples on how Islamic spirit embraced the cultural differences and integrated ethics while keeping in mind the local traditions that show pluralistic society

(Setiawan & Stevanus, 2023). The Inclusivity side that appeared did not come from theological compromise but from the moral of truth that it can be achieved by dialogue and mutual understanding.

Pluralism that grew from the century-long encounter was not left alone, but then preserved by intellectual leadership and ethics from Indonesian scholars. From the teaching, they promoted Islamic interpretations that teach and show the people that Islam is not about rigid religious obedience but also responsive to social diversity. Rosidi noted that the scholars created interpretative openness which then changed tolerance into moral habits, and then it formed Indonesian Islam that is compassionate instead of coercive (Rosidi et al, 2019). In their view, when people become believers of religion, they should also live peacefully with other people. This should be followed by holding their beliefs strongly while also respecting other people's beliefs.

That kind of disposition was not only found in Indonesia but also in the broader Malay world. As for Malaysia, it has had the same civilizational memory like Indonesia even though the political configuration is different. As a democratic country, Indonesia institutionalized pluralism in Pancasila, placing belief in the one and only God as its first point besides unity and justice. Meanwhile, Malaysia embedded Islam in its constitution but even so, they still continue to maintain the freedom of beliefs for its multicultural society (Salim & Rofik, 2018) (Hamidi et al, 2022). Both countries approached pluralism using different styles but they are parallel, which means, both approaches worked in continuing negotiation between universalities and particularities that was found, and between revelation and tradition.

Therefore, talking about Nusantara civilization was not only about geography or ethnicity, but to acknowledge the moral imagination. This moral has shaped people from a long time ago and was full of wisdom. This moral also becomes a reminder that we should not be afraid of differences, and that dialogue is not a weakness but strength. In reviewing this Nusantara civilization, we do not only talk about history but we find and reclaim a living philosophy. This paper argues that the legacy of interreligious encounters in the Nusantara is not a past relic, but a resource for the present time. This later

can be a model for how humanity may continue to build peace through understanding, moderation, and courage to remain open in the middle of diversity.

This research uses qualitative and comparative methodology to understand the historical and cultural processes that shaped interreligious encounters within the Nusantara. This approach tries to integrate several perspectives, from history, religious studies, and sociology to understand better about the complexity among local beliefs, external influence, and state policies. The method used is interpretative-historic analysis that focuses on tracing how tradition and religion developed through dialogue and adaptation. This research also uses comparative analysis by comparing the situation in two countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, and taking into account both countries' political policies about religion. This examines deeper about how pluralism is applied in both states using different strategies.

Result and Discussion

The Shared Past: Nusantara as One Cultural Sphere

When we talk about the concept of Nusantara, we have to understand first that the term does not only refer to geographical area but also the same civilizational that was owned together which built from maritime mobility and cultural contacts for centuries. Before the emergence of the modern state, the Malay Archipelago was a single zone where we can find linguistic interaction, spiritual, and commercial. From the first time of Srivijaya rule in Sumatra to Majapahit in Java, and Melaka Sultanate in Malay Peninsula, this region has functioned as the corridor of ideas, trading, and beliefs. The sea became a bridge that connected them through the interaction of merchants and scholars, not as a barrier.

The connection from the bridge that has been mentioned above makes the spreading of the religious system possible to happen. The bridge connected Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as animistic tradition from indigenous people, thus they interact dynamically. Each newcoming belief did not arrive to change the pre-existed beliefs, but to be included in a dialogue where they can have synergy with the local cosmology. Nusantara evolved as a layered encounter so

that it could accommodate the 'old' beliefs to not be eliminated. In contrast, this is to reinterpret it so it can fit the new frameworks (Hamidi, 2022). The result is the synthesis typically from south east Asia where temples, mosques, and ancestral shrines could coexist.

In Java, for example, the *Wali Songo* had tried to translate the Islamic teachings into local idioms, and to blend Qur'anic ethics with Javanese mysticism (*kebatinan*). Their approach was later identified as *cultural da'wah* which shows how Islam was taught through local art, architecture, and ritual (Linda Muhammad & Duderija, 2018.). For instance, the existence of temples in their architecture, or from art like *gamelan* and *wayang kulit*. In that tradition, we can see how Hindu-Buddhist symbolism resonated with Islamic cosmology, especially seen in the way *Wali Songo* played the *wayang kulit*. In addition to that, the pluralistic synthesis found in the 'old' traditions shaped the moral and aesthetic foundation of the Nusantara worldview. Its civilizational ethos was often expressed through some authentic values in the area, such as harmony, respecting differences, and keeping social balance. Finally, it was sustained through communal rituals and local governance.

By the fifteenth century, the rise of the Melaka Sultanate in Malaysia became a turning point, which in that time Islam gained political support. Although Islam was supported in the political and state context, this religion kept trying to manage being accommodative. The court's endorsement of Sufism and customary law allowed integration between sharia and local ethics/local wisdom (Latif, 2024). In this process, Islam did not try to eliminate the local civilizational framework, but it tried to give new energy to the local wisdom with universalist ideals. This, indirectly, became a strategy so that Islam in the context of Melaka's intellectual legacy later could spread smoothly without being forceful and instead, creating the foundation for a shared Malay-Islamic identity that can be witnessed until today.

Hence, to speak of the *Nusantara civilization* is to acknowledge the heritage in which dialogue took place. The dialogue played an important role where it negotiated with local beliefs, not by dominating. The past history finally reminds us that civilizations could grow not solely through purity, but it really needs this one factor,

that is exchange. Later, Islam also spread not by using isolation but by using encounters. With this dialogical tradition, both Indonesia and Malaysia continue to define their modern religious identities. For Indonesia, it defines its inclusive principles by applying *Pancasila*, while Malaysia is by embedding Islam's institutional presence within a plural society. Both countries, though in different ways, have tried their best to carry forward the ancient wisdom that coexists with other religions.

Syncretism, Pluralism, and the Formation of the Nusantara Civilization

From a long time ago, syncretism has been defined as a religious and cultural identity in the Nusantara. Instead of forcing rigid religious practices, the encounters between Hindu-Buddhist tradition and indigenous tradition with Islam formed a negotiated religiosity. This process did not happen from forceful theology compromise but from a strategy where culture became creativity for introducing religions that came later. This strategy helped people to accept the new values more easily because they did not have to leave behind their ancestor beliefs and heritage. Therefore, the shaping of Nusantara civilization cannot be read as synthetic history because the previous differences, in fact, that have been negotiated, can still be seen today as it is the very prominent foundation in this region.

The existence of Candi Prambanan or Candi Borobudur in Indonesia showed that the integration between the two values from different beliefs had taken place a long time ago. Yet even at this early stage, local animistic belief of their ancestors, as well as the nature spirits was never replaced. In contrast it was taken into the new cosmology by the religions that came later in that area. When Islam entered, it encountered the local wisdom and tradition as a hybrid spiritual environment. Islam did not attempt to erase it, but Muslim scholars and preachers such as the *Wali Songo* transformed local traditions into many kinds of "vehicles" of Islamic moral teaching as a way to introduce Islam.

One of the most prominent examples that can be seen is Slametan tradition, which is a ritual or tradition for people to eat together. This tradition is practiced widely in Java and other places in Indonesia because it is believed to bring the sacred values of social harmony, and

spiritual aspect between the ancestor heritage before Islam and Islamic idea about blessings (barakah). It is believed that from this Slametan, people learn to share and maintain the relation with society in general as well as showing their gratefulness. As Muqoddam and Maghfiroh stated, this ritual became the pillar of Islam in Nusantara where expression of beliefs and culture is practiced together because they are related to each other, and this is to maintain the communal solidarity (Muqoddam & Maghfiroh, 2019). In this context, syncretism does not become an adaptation but also theological inclusivity. Islam in Nusantara grew as cultural Islam which applied the values from revelation and also the expression for tradition. Salim and Rofik mentioned this phenomenon as moderation and this showed pluralism that has been the backbone of Indonesia moral identity (Salim and Rofik, 2019). This moderation stands strongly and is able to fight radical homogenization and secular fragmentation.

In the broader regional context, this synthetic pattern also influenced the Malay Peninsula. The former first Malay Sultanate adopted Islam by keeping the cosmological politic and customary law. Pratama has observed that the pluralistic society in Malaysia indicated a historical layer where Islam as the state constitution lives in harmony with other pluralistic traditions inherited from pre-modern Malay (Pratama, 2022). The distinction between Indonesia and Malaysia is in their way of institutionalizing religion in the state. On one hand, Indonesia formalized pluralism through Pancasila. On the other hand, Malaysia integrated Islamic values into its constitutional framework. Yet, both countries showed the same logic in the civilization, which is about balancing faith and culture.

Thus, the formation of the Nusantara civilization can be seen as a process of dialogical construction, not domination. This shows what Hamidi (2022) called as moderation of civilization which rejected dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, tradition and modernity. Syncretism does not confuse between religion and tradition, but coherency for both. This indicated that truth can be gained by diverse cultural expression and devotion. This openness, then, became the key of harmony and creativity in Nusantara, which allowed the continuity of pluralism in dealing with colonial

disruption, politics, and ideology.

At a deeper level, pluralism in the Nusantara context goes far beyond mere tolerance. As Zaky Mubarook and Rahman (2021) described, pluralism is a form of spiritual dialogue. Dialogue portrayed the effort in exchanging continuous meaning between traditions. This approach confirmed that diversity is part of sunnatullah, so living in a coexistence society can be counted as a form of worship. The Nusantara pluralism is not abstract because it can be found in everyday practice, such as slametan, kenduri, and interreligious participation in communal activities. The relational ethics from these traditions is not dismissed, but it is embraced and became part of social harmony. Finally, the comparative reflection between Indonesia and Malaysia reveals a deeper truth, that moderation in the Nusantara is not a modern invention but a civilizational inheritance.

Conclusion

What we can see today of the Nusantara civilization is proof that interreligious encounters that happened in the past have brought us to where we stand now. When humanity is put first before anything, it can transform difference into harmony as we see in the explanation above. The historical development shows that encounters among religions and worldviews can result with creativity. The Nusantara's strength is in its relational pluralism which embraces diversity into coexistence. Meanwhile, the cultural and spiritual barriers are always being negotiated to reach harmony in society. Although syncretism is sometimes understood as simplifying, in fact, in this context, syncretism became a moral and social mechanism to build society. Religious practices and local customs are not seen as ancestral heritage anymore, but as a bridge that can connect beliefs and daily life.

In modern times, both Indonesia and Malaysia have adapted this heritage into its different national framework. Indonesia embraces pluralism as civic ideology through Pancasila while Malaysia puts religion as its constitutional moral identity. Although they use different expressions and approach, both still show the same civilisational memory. Both countries have succeeded in holding their belief that diversity is not a threat but a foundation for unity. Pluralism and

moderation, however, was not the sole idea that wanted to be achieved because it still needs continuation. The challenge in modern times is how to preserve interreligious dialogue and modernity. In addition, it needs to be followed up on how we keep the harmony between beliefs and social life, without being trapped in polarization and politization. This requires awareness from each element in the society, such as education, public opinion, and collaboration among religions. In a nutshell, the harmony that can be seen in the Nusantara nowadays must be preserved because it was built for a long time and should not be neglected. Therefore, Nusantara is not merely about the past history or recent time but it is also a vision for the future.

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