

The History of Islamic Preaching by Scholars in Terengganu up to the Year 1888

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Abstract

The development of Islam in Terengganu was significantly shaped by advancements in knowledge, Islamic preaching (dakwah), language, trade, political progress, and familial ties, particularly through marriage. The region's strategic location and the surrounding Malay cultural environment played a crucial role in promoting Islamic values, particularly in governance, socio-economic development, and religious education. By the 7th to 13th centuries CE, Islam had firmly taken root in Terengganu, becoming the foundation of governance and influencing various aspects of society. The integration of Islam into the region's political and social fabric was driven by the efforts of scholars, local leaders, and rulers who actively spread Islamic teachings through formal institutions like mosques and traditional Islamic schools (pondok). Islamic scholars employed a variety of strategies for preaching, including governance, education, trade, and the promotion of intellectual culture. The ruling class in Terengganu not only embraced Islam as a central belief system but also regarded it as the cornerstone of civilization. As a result, Islamic law gradually replaced the Hindu-Buddhist-based customary practices that had previously guided the region's legal systems. This transition can be seen in the significant shift towards Islamic governance, where Islamic principles were established as the foundation of both social and political order. Evidence of Islam's early institutional role in Terengganu can be found in historical artifacts, such as the Batu Bersurat (inscribed stone tablet), which documents the adoption of Islamic laws and regulations. The concerted efforts of scholars and rulers to institutionalize Islam in Terengganu culminated in the formalization of the state's governance framework with the creation of the Undang-Undang Tubuh Bagi Diri Kerajaan Terengganu (Terengganu State Constitution) in 1911. This document highlights the deep-rooted influence of Islamic principles in shaping the state's political and legal structure.

Keywords: Dakwah, Scholars, Islamic Governance, Intellectual Culture, Terengganu.

Introduction

The early development of Islam in Terengganu was facilitated by scholars who engaged in indirect preaching activities (dakwah) through trade, marriage, and involvement in politics and governance. The subsequent stages of Islamic propagation were carried out through teachings in mosques, the homes of religious scholars (tok guru), prayer halls (surau and balaisah), madrasahs, and later expanded more formally in the pondok educational institutions. The arrival of Islam was well-received by the Malay community in Terengganu, especially among the ruling class and the royal court.

The history of Islam's arrival in Terengganu coincides with the earliest evidence of Islam's spread, such as in Pasai (1282 CE). It is believed that Terengganu embraced Islam during the same wave brought by Arab and Persian missionaries and traders who shifted their focus from China to the Malay Archipelago, including Kedah as noted by al-Attas, (1969). However, the intellectual and Islamic tradition became more pronounced in Pasai. It is even plausible that Islam reached Terengganu earlier than these regions, as evidence shows that by 1303, the Terengganu authorities were already implementing Islamic law in their legal and judicial systems.

Furthermore, Terengganu's strategic position as a maritime crossroads en route to China and across Southeast Asia made it an ideal center for governance, Islamic preaching, and trade, enhancing its significance in the broader propagation of Islam in the region.

Methodology

This study employs a historical approach to trace the development of Islamic dakwah in Terengganu, with a focus on the role of ulama in governance, education, trade, and the culture of knowledge. Through the study of historical documents such as the Batu Bersurat Terengganu, Jawi manuscripts, and works of the ulama, this study aims to assess how Islamic dakwah influenced the governance system and the social life of the people in Terengganu. A qualitative approach will be used to gather in-depth data through interviews with historians and local ulama, as well as literature review and secondary sources.

Additionally, content analysis will be applied to evaluate the texts produced by the ulama in the form of manuscripts and religious books. The study will examine how these works served as a medium for dakwah, spreading Islamic teachings, and strengthening religious values within society. A comparative approach will also be used to compare the development of dakwah in Terengganu with other regions in the Malay Archipelago, particularly in the context of the influence of ulama and Islam-based governance systems.

Lastly, this study will use social and cultural analysis to assess how Islamic dakwah shaped the social structure and culture of knowledge in Terengganu. The focus will be on the development of religious education through Jawi, which became the main medium for the dissemination of knowledge. All data collected will be critically analyzed to identify the influence of ulama in governance and education, as well as their contribution to the development of Islamic society in Terengganu.

The Establishment of Islam in Terengganu

The arrival of Islam in Terengganu has been widely discussed among historians, with various perspectives on its establishment. Many agree that Islam was introduced through Middle Eastern influences, specifically by Arab merchants engaged in trade. Simultaneously, these merchants propagated Islamic teachings (dakwah) in the region. Additionally, the spread of Islam in Terengganu was further facilitated through marriage alliances and governmental administration.

Trade played a pivotal role in the early spread of Islam. Recognizing its importance, the Terengganu rulers established several trading ports around Kuala Terengganu, such as Tanjung, Kedai Payang, Hiliran, Pulau Kambing, and Kuala Berang, including Sungai Tersat and Kampung Buloh. By the 8th century CE, these ports had attracted foreign traders, including Arabs and Persians, who brought Middle Eastern influences to the region (Azmi, 1982). Historical records indicate that Muslim merchants had been arriving in Terengganu since the 8th century, initiating a sustained wave of Islamic propagation. Persian Muslims also contributed significantly to this effort, representing a second phase of Islamic expansion in Southeast Asia (Azmi, 1982:8). Islam reached Terengganu at least half a century before Malacca, though the identity of its earliest introducers remains unclear (Azmi, 1982).

The earliest recorded evidence of Islam's acceptance in Terengganu is the Batu Bersurat (Inscribed Stone), discovered in Kampung Buloh in 1902 by Sayid Hussein Ghulam al-Bukhari (Paterson, 1924). Dated Friday, 4th of Rajab 702 Hijrah (February 22, 1303 CE), the inscription, written in Arabic script, highlights the early adoption of Islamic law in Terengganu. Found at Kuala Berang, near the confluence of three tributaries, the location was a bustling center of trade and governance (Paterson, 1924).

The Batu Bersurat solidifies Terengganu's reputation as a significant Islamic center in the Malay world for over 700 years. It contains declarations emphasizing the role of rulers in upholding Islamic governance. The inscription reads:

"In this land of mine, the religion of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) is supreme. The righteous ruler Mandalika upholds the command of Allah above all else."

This statement underscores the Sultan's central role in establishing an Islamic state. By the early 14th century, Islam was already the official religion of Terengganu. The Batu Bersurat, written in Jawi, is among the oldest Malay manuscripts recording laws dated Rajab 702 Hijrah (March 1303 CE), reinforcing Terengganu's crucial role in the early spread of Islam (Yahaya, 1998).

The contents of the Batu Bersurat demonstrate that Terengganu implemented Islamic law as the foundation of governance, including regulations on adultery, debt, family laws, and core tenets such as the shahadah (declaration of faith). Unlike other Malay states, Terengganu incorporated Islamic Sharia into its administrative system as early as 1303 CE. However, unlike the codified Malacca Laws, Terengganu's laws were not systematically documented (Abdullah, 2001). The state also pioneered dakwah efforts through public teachings and implemented legal principles reflecting Prophet Muhammad's practices in Madinah, while other states in the region adopted Islamic governance centuries later.

Forms of Dissemination

Terengganu's unique position as a sheltered stopover made it a natural refuge for political exiles, war refugees, and migrants. Over time, it became a hub for missionaries and scholars who actively propagated Islam. Islamic teachings spread through educational efforts in **pondok, surau, balaisah**, madrasahs, and mosques. While trade and familial ties like marriage also facilitated the spread of Islam, the development of formal education systems enhanced societal understanding of Islamic community life and strengthened **ukhuwwah Islamiah** (Islamic brotherhood). This widespread influence eventually permeated the administration, with rulers integrating Islam into governance and daily life. Consequently, Islamic laws became state laws, and its principles shaped societal norms.

The dissemination of Islam through trade accelerated as Terengganu gained prominence as a major port along the South China Sea. According to Wheatley (1959:11) and Chinese records, Terengganu became a vital trading hub frequented by Arab and Persian Muslim merchants. These interactions indirectly brought Middle Eastern influences and Islamic teachings, particularly when Kuala Berang emerged as an essential port. Missionaries often accompanied these traders, spreading Islam alongside commercial activities. By the 14th century, Islamic law had been officially declared in Terengganu, marking its firm establishment among the rulers, nobles, and general populace (Blagden, 1924).

Muslim traders settled along coastal regions, forming colonies and building mosques to sustain their religious practices. Missionaries established suraus, madrasahs, and pondok schools, where students gathered to learn Islamic teachings and sermons. This grassroots approach helped the Malay community embrace Islam and adopt its moral values. However, some Western historians, such as Kern (1956), misinterpreted suraus as deriving from Hindu influences. In reality, suraus served as centers for Islamic education and missionary efforts, led by religious leaders (Sheikhs or Tok Gurus) who guided students in spiritual practices, including Quranic recitation and memorization.

Despite colonial pressures, scholars remained resolute in spreading Islamic values. Their efforts included Quranic education for children, establishing religious schools, forming Islamic associations, and using mosques for teaching and sermons. These approaches resonated with the Malay community by emphasizing spiritual and moral development.

The spread of Islam culminated in the establishment of an Islamic government in Terengganu, characterized by religious propagation, human development, administrative reforms, and the implementation of Islamic legal systems. Although colonial interventions disrupted the focus of scholars, they persisted in opposing the colonizers and rebuilding Islamic institutions, particularly during the reign of Sultan Omar before 1881 CE.

The scholars' role extended beyond religious teachings, fostering unity and resilience within the community. They earned respect for their wisdom, leadership, and ability to resolve issues through dialogue. The legacy of these scholars in pre-independence Terengganu remains a significant chapter in its history, highlighting their contributions to spiritual and social progress.

The Influence of Arab Culture on the Spread of Islam in Terengganu

The spread of Islam in Terengganu, and the broader Malay Archipelago, holds a significant place in the history of Islamic propagation. The arrival of Islam brought transformative changes to the Malay community, including a shift from illiteracy to knowledge through the introduction of Jawi-Arabic script. Jawi, derived entirely from Arabic script, was adapted to suit the Malay language and became a key medium for disseminating knowledge and Islamic teachings. Over time, Jawi evolved into the dominant script for education, literature, and administration in the region. Its letters and calligraphy closely resemble Arabic script, with additional letters created to accommodate specific Malay phonetics.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas noted that the oldest known Jawi inscription in the Malay Peninsula is the Terengganu Inscription Stone, discovered in Kuala Berang. Dated to Friday, 4th of Rejab, 702 AH (22nd February 1303 CE), this stone highlights Islam's profound influence in Terengganu, particularly in its emphasis on Islamic jurisprudence (**fiqh**) and theology (**aqidah**) practiced by both rulers and citizens.

Notably, the Jawi script on the Terengganu Inscription Stone introduced five new characters—**nya**, **ca**, **nga**, **pa**, and **ga**—by modifying Arabic script with additional diacritical marks. These innovations, inspired by Arabic-Persian scripts, suggest Persian scholars also played a significant role in spreading Islam in Terengganu. However, some diacritical marks, such as those for **pa**, are missing, possibly due to erosion or deliberate omission (Musa, 1999).

The script on the stone reflects an early form of **khat** (Islamic calligraphy) from the 7th century CE during the Umayyad Dynasty, which later developed into **Thuluth**, **Muhaqqaq**, and **Raihani** styles (Abdullah et al., 2007).

For over 700 years, Jawi remained the official script in Terengganu, from the 13th century until the mid-20th century. Its prominence aligned with the widespread use of the Malay language as a lingua franca. European, Chinese, and Indian traders relied on Malay and Jawi for communication, using it for treaties, trade permits, and official documents.

Scholars widely agree that Arabic script was adapted for writing Malay as early as the 13th century CE. The Terengganu Inscription Stone provides definitive evidence of this adaptation, as noted by Fatimi and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. The modified Arabic script, known as **Jawi**, became a hallmark of Islamic education and administration in the region.

Da'wah and the Development of Knowledge Culture

Through religious writings and studies, **da'wah** (Islamic missionary work) sparked a cultural revolution of knowledge that began in the 11th century CE and peaked in the 16th century CE. This revolution, especially in the context of religious education, flourished through the use of Jawi script, a direct result of Islamic influence. Malay, previously limited in its spread, became the **lingua franca** for trade and a language of knowledge across the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago), facilitating the dissemination of knowledge, especially Islamic teachings, through Jawi-Arabic script (Piah, 2000).

Islamic knowledge development in the Malay Peninsula immortalized Jawi script in literary works, religious texts, folklore, epics, historical accounts, laws, prose, and classical

poetry. Significant historical records, such as the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, were documented in Jawi, exemplified by the discovery of the Terengganu Inscription Stone in Kuala Berang, Terengganu.

The da'wah-driven spread of knowledge and writing in Terengganu grew rapidly in the 19th century CE. However, religious education systems had already taken root before the 13th century CE, as evidenced by inscriptions on the Terengganu Inscription Stone. Scholars like Syed Zainal Abidin al-Idrus contributed extensively to Jawi literature, producing religious texts used in educational settings such as suraus, **pondoks**, and mosques. Born in Terengganu and educated under Syeikh Abdul Kadir bin Abdul Rahman, Syed Zainal authored various religious works, including poetry (**nazam**) such as *Kanz al-Ula* (The Life of the Prophet), *Sirah al-Nabawiyyah* (The Prophet's History), *Jawahir al-Saniyyah*, *al-Durrah al-Fakhirat*, and *Tahiyat al-Wildan*. His prose works include *Targhib al-Sibyan fi Hifzi 'Aqid al-Iman*, *Diya' 'Uqud al-Durratain fi Tarjamah Kalimatain al-Syhadatain*, *Mukhtasar*, and *Sullam al-Tawfiq* (Bakar, 1991).

A renowned Malay scholar from Terengganu, Syeikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah (died 1736), also known as Tuk Pulau Manis, taught **tasawuf** (Islamic mysticism) aligned with the Sunni tradition (**Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah**). His most notable Jawi manuscript was a commentary on the famous Sufi work *Kitab Hikam* by Imam Taj al-Din bin Ata' Allah al-Iskandari (Piah, 2000).

Political literature also emerged from Terengganu, including *Kitab Adab Raja-raja* and *Kitab Nasihat Raja-raja*, written by Syeikh Duyong for the Terengganu royal court. *Panji tales*—stories of Malay chivalry—greatly influenced the Malay psyche, particularly in Terengganu, as they spread from Riau, Johor, and Pahang to Terengganu via royal institutions. These stories gained immense popularity in the region (Piah, 2000). Syeikh Duyong, a prolific author, wrote at least 74 manuscripts, which are preserved in nine boxes at the National Archives (*National Archives, Terengganu/Pahang Branch, Printed Materials*, 2003).

The longest historical poem known today, *Syair Tawarikh Zainal Abidin*, comprises 3,335 stanzas. It was written by Tengku Dalam Kalsom binti Tengku Wook Khazaki in the 1930s (Yusoff, 1980:54). This poem chronicles the reigns of three sultans in Terengganu, reflecting the continuity of historical writing among Malay communities across the Nusantara (Piah, 2000).

Da'wah Through the Implementation of Sharia in Governance

The Sultanate of Terengganu served as the central institution of governance, with the Sultan as the ruler and head of administration. Any decisions or implementations required the Sultan's consent. Since its inception, the Sultanate faced minimal challenges due to the strong support from its people. The **ulama** (Islamic scholars) acted as advisors and problem solvers for the community.

Da'wah activities were further strengthened as the monarchy forged connections with the Johor Sultanate and Middle Eastern scholars. Tun Zainal from Johor gained the support of Terengganu leaders and eventually became the ruler of Terengganu, taking the title Sultan Zainal Abidin I. He moved the administrative center to Kuala Terengganu in the early 18th

century CE (Dolah, 1985). At that time, Johor had already established a strong Islamic influence in its administrative system.

During the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin I (1725–1739), state officials were appointed from among royal family members and scholars. These officials, including the Bendahara (Prime Minister), Temenggung (Security Officer), Bendahari (Treasurer), Mufti (Islamic Jurist), Kadi (Judge), Panglima (Commander), and Security Guards, supported the Sultan in governance (Ngah, 1997). The judicial and legislative systems were based on **Sharia law**. Positions such as Mufti and Kadi were established to oversee legal matters, including criminal punishments. For example, thieves faced amputation, murderers were executed, and lesser crimes like brawling were punished with **ta'zir** (discretionary punishment) or imprisonment. Kuala Berang initially served as the center for da'wah and governance but was later relocated to Kuala Terengganu when the Sultan moved there (Ngah, 1997).

Reforms Under Sultan Umar

Sultan Umar, who ruled from 1838 to 1876, implemented significant Islamic administrative and legal reforms. He also prioritized spiritual development among his people. For instance, Sultan Umar upgraded the wooden Abidin Mosque, built during Sultan Zainal Abidin II's reign, into a stone structure. He transformed his palace hall into a venue for delivering rulings based on Sharia.

Sultan Umar was deeply committed to religious knowledge, regularly studying with local scholars such as Tok Syeikh Duyong, whose guidance he sought on state administrative matters. The Sultan elevated scholars to pivotal roles within the palace and state governance. This close relationship between the Sultan and the **ulama** ensured peace, prosperity, and Islamic adherence in Terengganu, earning the state the title *Darul Salam* (Abode of Peace).

Implementation of Sharia-Based Laws

In 1857, during Sultan Umar's rule, the position of Mufti was entrusted to renowned Malay scholars like Syeikh Abdul Kadir bin Abdul Rahim and later Tok Syeikh Duyong. **Kadis** were also appointed to enforce Sharia law. Islamic criminal laws, including **Hudud**, **Qisas**, and **Diyat**, were enforced, and vices such as gambling were strictly prohibited. For example, **Diyat** addressed injuries involving bodily harm or physical damage.

Punishments based on Islamic law were issued through Sharia courts. Historical records mention the execution of a murderer who killed a royal child, the amputation of a thief's hand, and the public shaming of those neglecting Friday prayers or fasting. Offenders of the latter were paraded through town as a deterrent. During Sultan Umar's reign, only one person was stoned to death for adultery. Additionally, the Sultan prohibited non-Muslims from constructing new houses of worship.

These actions illustrate the Sultan's dedication to embedding Islamic principles in governance while maintaining social harmony.

Conclusion

The development of da'wah in the governance system, education, trade, and intellectual culture of Terengganu was primarily driven by the **ulama** (Islamic scholars). Their

efforts in promoting da'wah yielded significant results, successfully establishing an Islamic-based governance system. The **ulama** took advantage of the ruling authorities' support to expand da'wah through teaching and religious education. Both local and foreign **ulama** collaborated to propagate Islam through trade. Additionally, they played a vital role in promoting da'wah through intellectual activities, producing numerous writings that served as references, guides, and reading materials for the Malay community.

Islamic rule in Terengganu utilized its governance as a medium to uphold Islamic values. Literary works and religious texts became key tools for spreading Islamic messages and defending Terengganu against foreign threats.

Writing served as a durable means of da'wah, offering guidance and education for future generations as long as these works remained preserved. The **ulama** capitalized on this opportunity to instill Islamic teachings, educate the people, raise awareness, and clarify the true demands of Islam. The use of **Jawi** script remains an enduring cultural legacy, widely used today in religious education at schools, traditional learning centers (*pondok*), and mosques or prayer halls in villages.

The contributions of the **ulama** remain central to the Islamic mission in Terengganu. Their tireless efforts in defending and promoting Islam laid the foundation for the enduring strength and inspiration of the Islamic Malay government in Terengganu.

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