

RESISTING COLONIALISM AND THE FORMATION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN NUSANTARA-INDONESIA

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of European colonialism on the political, economic, and religious identity dynamics of Muslim communities in the Nusantara while highlighting Islam’s role as a pillar of resistance. The research analyzes primary archives and secondary literature within a “Challenge and Response” framework using a historical-qualitative methodology. Findings show that Islamic sultanates had developed strong economic and cultural networks before European colonization. Policies of monopoly and cultural assimilation by the Portuguese and Dutch triggered resistance, marked by physical opposition and the reaffirmation of religious identity. Islamic institutions such as pesantren, ulama networks, and Sufi leaders were central in fostering solidarity and anti-colonial sentiments. Resistance spanned political, cultural, and spiritual domains, positioning Islam as an inspiration for social movements. This study concludes that colonialism accelerated the formation of Islamic identity as a resistance force, paving the way for structured liberation movements.

Keywords: Colonialism, Islamization, Sultanates, Resistance, Religious Identity

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Introduction

The resistance of Muslim communities against colonialism in Indonesia is a multifaceted and complex theme, intertwining social, political, and religious aspects.¹ Since the 13th century, the Nusantara region has been a strategic hub for international trade, connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.² The arrival of Islam through traders and religious missionaries established a strong socio-religious foundation, particularly in major ports such as Sumatra, Java, and Maluku. With the arrival of European powers—Portuguese and Dutch—in the 16th century, conflicts arose between established Islamic sultanates and colonial forces driven by economic ambitions (spice trade monopoly) and religious motives (Christian proselytization). These clashes not only resulted in physical confrontations but also spurred new dynamics in cultural and collective identity. Recent historiographical studies emphasize the need for interdisciplinary approaches connecting social, political, economic, and religious dimensions to holistically understand Muslim responses and resistance.³

Research developments indicate that Islamic identity became increasingly solid under colonial pressure due to religious factors and social consolidation.⁴ Religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) emphasized equality and justice while rejecting the exploitation caused by colonialism.⁵ Religious resolutions and fatwas from ulama, kyai, and tarekat leaders inspired jihad or resistance, rooted in both spiritual and moral motivations.⁶ Additionally, social and cultural contexts played crucial roles. Social movements, such as those in Cirebon in the early 20th century, demonstrated how Islamic traditions mobilized the masses to demand social and political rights and oppose detrimental colonial policies.⁷

Despite extensive research on the tension between colonialism and Islam, several key issues remain unresolved. First, how Muslim communities positioned themselves and strategized resistance amidst economic disparities exacerbated by colonial monopolies. Second, the extent to which religious legitimacy mobilized social support, whether through Islamic organizations like NU or charismatic leaders in pesantren. Previous studies have highlighted various forms of resistance, from physical battles (e.g., in Aceh, Banten, and Makassar) to diplomacy and cultural adaptation.⁸ However, a single narrative often fails to capture the diversity of strategies across the different sociocultural contexts of the Nusantara.

Scholars propose chronological and structural approaches to colonial history to address these issues. These studies examine key events, such as the conquest of Malacca in 1511, the formation of the VOC in 1602, and armed uprisings in Islamic kingdoms. Chronological perspectives reveal escalating conflicts driven by colonial policies like divide, impera, and resource exploitation.⁹ While these studies highlight political-economic dynamics, they often lack depth in exploring cultural and religious dimensions. Subsequent research focuses on the roles of religious institutions and local Islamic

traditions as tools of resistance. In Lombok, for example, social movements led by Tuan Guru in the 19th century illustrate how religious leaders' charisma mobilized collective consciousness against colonialism.¹⁰ Similarly, in Java, major religious organizations like NU reinforced opposition to colonial domination through resolutions like the jihad fatwa, legitimizing both physical and moral struggles.¹¹ These examples underscore Islam's role not only in political and economic arenas but also in protecting cultural spaces from foreign value invasion. Islamic fatwas and teachings were ethical foundations for rejecting arbitrary colonial policies while framing social movements with religious legitimacy.

Other literature highlights the populist dimensions of Islam as a response to prolonged injustice.¹² In this context, radicalization is seen as a reaction to economic and political marginalization rather than merely a colonial legacy. Some studies link this to international factors, particularly during the Cold War, which allowed certain ideologies to flourish in Southeast Asia.¹³ Interpretations of jihad vary, from moderate to militant, depending on each movement's social context and ideological construction.¹⁴ However, more detailed explanations are needed on how cultural and religious transformations occurred at the grassroots level, especially in the everyday lives of Muslim communities under colonial pressure.

A review of the literature on proposed solutions—including chronological approaches, the role of religious institutions, and the dynamics of Islamic populism—reveals significant gaps in understanding the internalization of resistance at the community level. While many studies document major wars or large-scale uprisings, they often overlook the gradual and covert cultural or spiritual resistance occurring locally.¹⁵ For example, the subtle meanings of jihad, daily religious practices, or ulama leadership in remote villages have played long-term roles in shaping resistance. Similarly, comprehensive studies on how Islamic organizations like NU addressed internal challenges to maintain collective agreements amidst colonial pressures and changing times are lacking.¹⁶

Based on these observations, this study aims to clarify the dynamics of Muslim resistance against colonialism in the Nusantara by highlighting the roles of religious organizations, the construction of jihad narratives, and social aspects that fostered collective movements. This study also contributes novelty by examining local sources (e.g., community records, pesantren archives, and religious documents) that have been underexplored. The central hypothesis posits that Islamic movements in the Nusantara creatively adapted, using Islamic identity as a moral foundation and an effective tool of solidarity against colonialism. By analyzing concrete examples, this research seeks to fill gaps in the literature on the internalization of cultural resistance, encompassing religious rituals, social institutions, and the diplomatic strategies employed by ulama and Islamic organizations. Broadly, this study analyzes the colonial period and its impact on the independence era, underscoring the significant influence of Islamic identity in shaping social movements advocating for justice and national sovereignty.

Method

This study employs a historical-qualitative approach, focusing on a chronological and interpretative understanding of historical data.¹⁷ This approach is chosen because the topic of Muslim communities' responses and resistance to colonialism in the Nusantara requires an in-depth analysis of the long-term social, economic, and religious transformations. Through a historical review, key events such as the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, the establishment of the VOC, and various uprisings across the Nusantara can be systematically connected to Muslim responses.

This study employs Toynbee's *Challenge and Response* theory as its analytical framework. The theory posits that civilizations evolve, persist, or decline depending on how they respond to natural, social, or spiritual challenges. In the case of the Nusantara, colonialism represented a profound challenge that threatened the very foundations of indigenous society. The Muslim community, however, responded by turning Islam into the core of their collective identity, thereby transforming anti-colonial resistance from merely political or economic opposition into a fundamentally religious struggle.

Data collection incorporates both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources used in this research include in-depth historical books on colonialism; some Dutch archives (*Atjeh, Door H.C. Zentgraaff Gedrukt Bij "Koninklijke Drukkerij De Unie", Batavia*,¹⁸ *Bijlagen verslag EB-Handelingen*,¹⁹ *Babad Diponagoro*,²⁰ and *Hikayat Perang Sabil/Center of Gravity Jihad Aceh Melawan Kafir Belanda*). These documents provide factual insights into trade monopolies, political policies, and Muslim community reactions. Secondary sources, such as published books and scholarly articles analyzing the dynamics between colonialism and Islamic sultanates, complement primary sources. Some of the crucial books include *Sejarah Indonesia Modern 1200–2008*.²¹

The data analysis techniques involve source verification and critique, thematic data classification, and interpretation based on the "Challenge and Response" theoretical framework.²² Verification distinguishes between meaningful (valid) historical sources and those that are not meaningful (invalid) sources. To verify means carefully examining whether a historical source can be trusted. Verification is generally carried out in two forms: internal verification and external verification. External criticism may be undertaken through the following steps: identifying the source (who the author is, when and where it was produced, and for what purpose); examining its physical or digital authenticity (whether it is original, a copy, or a reproduction); determining the type of source (primary, originating directly from an actor, or secondary, derived from historians' analyses); and evaluating the credibility of the author or publisher. Internal criticism, on the other hand, requires reading the content critically, paying close attention to details of events, figures, time, and place; analyzing possible biases, whether political, ideological, or personal; and testing facts by comparing them with other sources (contemporary records, official archives, or other scholarly works).

In this regard, several Dutch archives may be regarded as reliable and valuable primary sources. This conclusion is based on in-depth research showing that these archives possess authenticity—their writing style and language correspond to the historical period of Dutch presence in Indonesia. Nevertheless, their content represents the perspective of the Dutch as colonizers. Meanwhile, the *Babad Diponegoro*, a key source for this study, is valuable, though not without certain limitations. Externally, the author is identified as the actor himself—Prince Diponegoro—who dictated the work during his exile in 1831–1832. It was transcribed in *Pegon* script by a scribe, and the extant manuscript under study is a 19th-century copy. UNESCO has recognized this text as part of the Memory of the World Register (2013). Internally, the *babad* constitutes a first-person narrative of Diponegoro concerning the Java War (1825–1830). It is therefore highly probable that the account contains bias, as it was written after his defeat, possibly serving as a means of reaffirming his identity as the *Ratu Adil* (“Just King”). Similarly, the *Hikayat Sabil* may be regarded as a relevant source, albeit not in its original version.

Source critique assesses documents’ authenticity, reliability, and context, including the authors’ or publishers’ backgrounds. After source critique, data are categorized into themes: politics, economics, religion, and culture. This thematic classification facilitates understanding diverse resistance patterns, ranging from physical uprisings to efforts to preserve religious identity through Islamic educational institutions or ulama networks.

Subsequently, data interpretation emphasizes understanding how Muslim communities faced external “challenges” from colonial powers and formulated varied “responses.” The analysis is conducted inductively by collecting evidence from various regions in the Nusantara—such as Aceh, Demak, Makassar, Ternate, and Tidore—and synthesizing it into a comprehensive narrative. This inductive approach enables the researcher to uncover the diversity of resistance strategies, including cultural and symbolic aspects often overlooked in political-economic explanations.

Throughout the analysis process, additional literature is consulted, particularly on postcolonial theories²³ and concepts of power relations.²⁴ This ensures that the study does not solely highlight the factual dynamics of wars or rebellions but also examines how religious and cultural values played crucial roles in motivating resistance. Postcolonial theory is beneficial for understanding that Muslim resistance was not merely open conflict but symbolic resistance, evident in the rejection of European cultural assimilation.

In the final stages, findings are integrated to evaluate the relevance and strength of arguments in previous studies. The results are tested by comparing cases and identifying common patterns or contextual differences across regions. By employing a historical-qualitative method encompassing source critique, data categorization, and inductive interpretation, this study aims to produce valid and comprehensive conclusions. It seeks to enrich the understanding of Islam’s role as a unifying force and a driver of resistance against colonialism.

Results and Discussion

The Historical Background of Islam in the Nusantara

The historical background of Islam in the Nusantara cannot be separated from the maritime trade routes that flourished from the 13th century. During this period, global port-to-port interactions played a pivotal role in facilitating the exchange of commodities, cultures, and ideas. Ports along the coasts of Sumatra, Java, and eastern regions such as the Maluku Islands became vibrant nodes of international trade. According to several historians, Muslim merchants from Gujarat, Arabia, and Persia played a significant role in introducing Islamic teachings to various port cities in the Nusantara. Within this context, Islam began to grow and spread across the region, integrating its teachings with local traditions and shaping a unique social character.²⁵

Archaeological evidence, such as the tomb of Fatimah binti Maimun in Leran, Gresik, dating back to 1082 CE, is often cited as an early indication of Islam's presence in the region. However, the significant spread of Islam is believed to have occurred intensively between the 13th and 15th centuries, coinciding with increased inter-port trade activity.²⁶ Maritime sultanates began to emerge with the support of local elites, merchants, and religious figures, including ulama, Sufis, and the Wali. During this phase, coastal communities with direct access to international trade networks were highly receptive to new influences, including Islamic teachings.²⁷

Major trade routes connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea accelerated the spread of Islam. The strategic positions of the Malacca and Sunda Straits and ports along the eastern coasts of Kalimantan and Sulawesi made the Nusantara a central hub for the transit of spices, agricultural products, and other commodities. Muslim traders arriving in the region conducted commercial activities and brought religious missions and cultural influences.²⁸ The local acceptance of Islam was strengthened by its capacity to offer social support networks, ethical norms, and integrated economic systems.

Over time, Muslim communities became increasingly diverse. Beyond traders, ulama and Sufis settled in port cities to spread Islamic teachings peacefully and gradually. This persuasive model of Islamic dissemination leveraged religious educational institutions such as *surau* (prayer houses) and *pondok* (Islamic boarding schools), as well as *da'wah* (propagation) activities that accommodated local traditions. The result was a cultural Islamization process, where Islamic values blended with local wisdom, creating a distinctive identity in coastal regions.²⁹ The successful Islamization of the Nusantara during this period is exemplified by the rise of maritime sultanates that played significant roles in controlling economic, political, and social life. The sultanates of Aceh, Demak, Makassar (Gowa-Tallo), Ternate, and Tidore are notable examples. These sultanates emerged and thrived due to two main factors: their ability to dominate strategic trade routes and the religious legitimacy attributed to their leaders.³⁰

For instance, the Sultanate of Aceh utilized its strategic position at the northern tip island trade routes in the eastern Nusantara. In the Maluku Islands, the Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore were renowned as major producers of spices (cloves, nutmeg), giving them significant bargaining power with foreign traders.³²

Within each Islamic sultanate in the Nusantara, governance structures combined traditional authority with religious principles. The sultan was viewed as both a political leader and a protector of the faith, tasked with ensuring justice and welfare for the people. This social order was reinforced by religious institutions that played pivotal roles in scholarship, education, and da'wah. Islamic scholars and intellectuals were often regarded as equals to royal officials in decision-making processes.³³ The symbiotic relationship between the sultan and the ulama fostered political and economic policies that generally supported the development of Islam within their territories.

The prosperity of maritime sultanates was not only derived from trade taxes but also from their ability to maintain social stability. By promoting religious tolerance and embedding inclusive Islamic values, the sultanates were able to integrate various ethnicities and tribes within their domains.³⁴ This model of governance was relatively successful for a time, though it eventually faced external challenges, particularly as European powers began aggressively seeking trade ties and even occupying territories.³⁵

Beyond economic and political aspects, Sufism played a central role in the development of Islam in the Nusantara. Many sultanates welcomed Sufi scholars from abroad to disseminate tarekat (Sufi orders) teachings in their regions.³⁶ Through mysticism, which was easily adaptable to local cultures, Islam became deeply rooted in various layers of society. The role of wali and Sufi teachers, such as the Walisongo in Java, was particularly significant. They facilitated the harmonious assimilation of religious practices with local cultures, incorporating traditional arts into da'wah activities.³⁷

Additionally, networks of ulama extended across sultanates. In some regions, these networks were facilitated by the mobility of traders, students, and pilgrims traveling to Mecca and Medina, who returned with broader religious knowledge. Conversely, local ulama often received material and political support from sultanates, which recognized that a deeper dissemination of Islam would strengthen Islamic governance legitimacy.³⁸

Unlike the inland areas, which were still deeply influenced by Hindu-Buddhist legacies, the coastal regions of the Nusantara underwent significant social transformations upon embracing Islam. For instance, on Java's northern coast, agrarian aristocracy gradually transitioned into cosmopolitan societies open to foreign influences.³⁹ Moreover, the involvement of Muslim merchants in local politics accelerated the shift from agrarian economies to commercial activities centered around ports. Islam became a new identity, transcending ethnic and cultural boundaries, facilitating interaction between ethnic groups and foreign traders.⁴⁰

European Colonialism in the Nusantara

European colonialism in the Nusantara was driven by the ambitions of European nations to acquire wealth (gold), spread religion (gospel), and achieve glory. These factors were greatly stimulated in Europe during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, coinciding with the rise of the Maritime Revolution and advancements in navigation and weaponry.⁴¹ The spirit of exploration and the desire to control the lucrative spice trade brought the Portuguese, Spanish, and later the Dutch to Southeast Asia, including the Nusantara. Among their primary motivations was control over valuable commodities such as cloves, nutmeg, and pepper, which were highly sought after in the international market. In addition to economic interests, there were religious missions, particularly among the Portuguese and Spanish, who aimed to spread Catholic Christianity, as well as a desire to expand territorial dominance to enhance prestige among other European nations.⁴²

The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 marked a new era in the history of trade and politics in the Nusantara. Before this conquest, Malacca had long been recognized as a bustling trade hub where merchants from India, China, the Middle East, and the Nusantara exchanged goods.⁴³ By seizing Malacca, the Portuguese sought to directly control the spice trade routes connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. This conquest raised alarm among other Islamic sultanates, such as Aceh and Johor, as the Portuguese brought not only commercial intentions but also conquests and religious expansion.⁴⁴ Following their control of Malacca, the Portuguese gradually extended their influence to the Maluku Islands, particularly in Ternate and Tidore, known for their high-quality cloves. The Portuguese presence often sparked conflicts with local rulers due to their aggressive approach, which marginalized traditional Muslim trading ports that had existed for centuries.⁴⁵

Not long after, the Spanish also attempted to establish influence in the Maluku Islands, particularly in Tidore, leading to rivalry between European powers. The political dynamics in the Nusantara became increasingly complex as local Islamic sultanates faced European nations and sought to leverage the rivalry between the Portuguese and Spanish to maintain their sovereignty. However, the local sultanates often struggled with a lack of advanced military technology and fragile alliances among themselves.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, several sultanates, such as Ternate, Aceh, and Demak, resisted European influence through armed rebellion, diplomacy, or partnerships with external powers like the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁷ Such resistance demonstrates that European colonialism did not take root without opposition. However, limited resources placed Muslim sultanates in a defensive position.

The next wave of colonialism emerged when the Dutch entered the Nusantara in the late 16th century. Unlike the Portuguese, who initially focused on Malacca and the Maluku Islands, the Dutch established the large-scale trading organization Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) in 1602. The VOC's robust institutional structure and

significant financial capital enabled systematic expansion.⁴⁸ Through its spice trade monopoly policy, the VOC required farmers and local rulers to sell their produce exclusively to the company at predetermined prices, causing substantial losses for local communities and Islamic sultanates that had previously controlled the trade routes. Gradually, the VOC entrenched its political control by constructing forts and trade offices in strategic ports such as Jayakarta (later renamed Batavia in 1619), Ambon, and other coastal areas.⁴⁹

As the VOC's power grew, it employed the *divide et impera* strategy, exploiting internal divisions within sultanates or conflicts between kingdoms to insert itself by offering political or military assistance, ultimately binding local powers in inequitable agreements.⁵⁰ This strategy allowed the VOC to subjugate Banten and Makassar and diminish the influence of Mataram. The VOC's actions not only controlled the economy but also disrupted the social and political structures of Islamic sultanates. The sultans lost sovereignty as they were forced to sign exploitative trade contracts or accept Dutch military garrisons. Simultaneously, local communities were increasingly burdened by taxes, forced cultivation, and declining commodity prices. Resistance to the VOC erupted in various regions, including the Mataram resistance of 1628–1629, uprisings in Banten, and wars in Makassar led by Sultan Hasanuddin. However, the VOC often prevailed due to superior weaponry and diplomatic tactics that fractured solidarity among Muslim kingdoms.⁵¹

Beyond economic motives, some Europeans, particularly missionaries and priests, also pursued an ideological drive to “spread religion.” Although the VOC was primarily trade-oriented, pressure from the Dutch church occasionally accompanied its expansion with Christianization efforts.⁵² However, these efforts were less intensive than those of the Portuguese, who had made religious missions a central pillar of their colonial activities. Nevertheless, tensions arose as Muslims perceived theological threats. In this context, Islam began to be defined as a “shared identity” distinguishing the Muslim population from the foreign colonial rulers. Ultimately, European attempts to assert control extended beyond economics and politics to the religious and cultural spheres, eliciting strong reactions from Muslim communities.⁵³

Faced with European penetration, many sultanates in the Nusantara adopted dual strategies. On one hand, they engaged in military resistance or rebellion when the VOC or Portuguese directly threatened their sovereignty. On the other hand, they utilized diplomacy to preserve limited autonomy.⁵⁴ The Sultanate of Aceh, for instance, sought cooperation with the Ottoman Empire to counterbalance the Portuguese naval forces. However, geographical distance and differing political interests often hindered practical external assistance. Similarly, Ternate and Tidore were caught in the rivalry between the Portuguese and Spanish. At the same time, Demak and its successors in Java repeatedly attempted to oust the Portuguese from Malacca, though without success. These situations illustrate that European hegemony did not stand unchallenged; on the contrary, fierce resistance underscored the vitality of Islamic sultanates in defending their sovereignty and identity.⁵⁵

European nations eventually gained control over key territories in the Nusantara through trade domination, political tactics, and production monopolies. Over time, Islamic sultanates lost sovereignty, although some retained symbolic internal authority. Banten, for example, under its 17th-century treaty with the VOC, did not collapse institutionally but had its economic control seized by the Dutch. Similarly, Makassar, after its defeat in the 1669 war, was forced to sign the Bongaya Treaty, limiting its political sovereignty. From the perspective of the Muslim population, this situation framed colonialism as a threat not only to economic well-being but also to social order and religious sovereignty. Traditional institutions such as pesantren (Islamic schools), ulama, and Sufi sheikhs increasingly played critical roles as moral bulwarks and centers of resistance mobilization.⁵⁶

From the “Challenge and Response” perspective, European colonialism in the Nusantara posed multidimensional political, economic, and religious challenges. Islamic sultanates responded with various resistance efforts, including diplomacy, strengthening Islamic identity, and physical conflict, which subsequently reinforced religious identity and fostered interregional solidarity. Amid trade monopolies and divide et impera policies, Muslim identity increasingly emerged as a symbol of resistance against injustice. Consequently, European colonialism became a catalyst for stronger regional and Islamic expressions. In some cases, Muslim resistance to foreign cultural imposition sparked rejection of European cultural values, manifesting in efforts to preserve local customs and traditions. Surviving sultanates utilized religious discourse as a means of legitimacy to garner popular support.

European colonialism in the Nusantara not only established dominance through economic control and political agreements but also triggered profound changes in the social structure and religious consciousness of the Muslim population. The motivations of “gold, gospel, and glory” underlying Portuguese, Spanish, and later Dutch expeditions generated conflicts that significantly impacted Islamic sultanates. Through the VOC, the Dutch solidified their monopoly and applied divide et impera tactics to fracture local kingdoms, systematically asserting hegemony. The responses of Islamic sultanates varied, from armed resistance to adaptive political strategies. The long-term impact was the transformation of the Nusantara’s political landscape, the decline of Muslim rulers’ sovereignty, and the strengthening of Islam as a unifying foundation for collective struggle. At the same time, the persistent dissatisfaction caused by colonial oppression laid the groundwork for future national movements. Within the broader context of Indonesian history, this colonial phase highlights the shift of power from local sultanates to European colonizers, paving the way for the long process of national identity formation and Muslim solidarity against foreign domination.⁵⁷

Religious and Cultural Responses to Colonialism in the Nusantara

The expansion of European colonialism in Nusantara influenced political and economic structures and penetrated religious and cultural spheres. When colonial authorities imposed policies that affected religious practices—whether directly through regulations or indirectly via resource monopolies—Muslim communities responded by constructing theological and cultural defenses. This response stemmed from the realization that Islam was not merely a spiritual belief but also a moral foundation and a collective symbol that strengthened solidarity amidst foreign threats.⁵⁸ Within this dynamic, the roles of ulama, pesantren, and traditional religious institutions became increasingly significant. They served as centers of education and ritual and as broader platforms for resistance.⁵⁹

Fundamentally, cultural resistance transcended mere physical action. Resistance emerged through the internalization of Islamic values, fostering a spirit of revival and rejecting attempts at cultural assimilation by colonial powers. Early colonizers, particularly the Portuguese, prioritized religious missions aimed at spreading Christianity. Meanwhile, the Dutch—though primarily profit-driven—supported Christian proselytization through missionary institutions. The imposition of new norms in various regions, whether through colonial regulations or missionary activities, often sparked theological tensions. Muslim communities, especially in religious centers such as Aceh, Banten, and pesantren in Java, responded by reinforcing their Islamic identity. This process was supported by the ulama, kiai, and Sufi leaders, who issued fatwas and moral calls urging Muslims to avoid practices contrary to Islamic teachings, such as participating in Christian rituals or adopting European cultural symbols deemed detrimental to Muslim identity.⁶⁰

From a social perspective, the rise of religious and cultural resistance can be interpreted as an effort to preserve spiritual autonomy. As colonial policies gradually undermined political structures, Islamic identity became society's last bastion of continuity. The strong pre-existing connections between the ulama and the Muslim community, established through educational networks and religious gatherings, were further solidified under external pressures. Criticism of VOC trade monopolies, opposition to excessive taxation policies, and social movements in various regions were often intertwined with religious discourses that framed colonial powers as "*Londo kapi, wilanda kaffir*".⁶¹ While this binary perspective may seem simplistic, it effectively cultivated grassroots solidarity, as Muslims felt compelled to defend their religion against foreign penetration.

In this context, the Java War between Diponegoro's forces and the Dutch was deeply imbued with religious values, with religion serving as the driving force and primary motivation behind their resistance to colonial rule. In the *Babad Diponegoro*, it is stated:

"... *pan kathah belanipun sampun prapta sabilollahi...*".⁶² had fallen (martyred) in the path of God (sabilillah)."

This indicates that the war was fundamentally religious in nature, and therefore those who fell in battle were regarded as martyrs.

In another passage, the *Babad Diponegoro* affirms:

“...*pinatenan dadya kathah ingkang sahid tanah Jawa sadaya ...*”.⁶³

The *Babad Diponegoro* thus contains at least three explicit statements confirming that the motivation behind Diponegoro's army in waging war was rooted in Islam, framed through the concepts of *perang sabil/sabilillah* martyrdom, (*mati syahid*), divine approval (*ridha Allah*), and the triumph of religion.

Meanwhile, in regions far from Java, similar anti-colonial struggles, such as the Aceh War, also occurred with religion as the central motivation. The war against colonial forces in Aceh was almost always carried out based on religious motivation. Dutch archival records describe the motivation of the Acehnese as follows: “...*De Koran schrijft den oorlog tegen de ongeloovigen voor; de Mohammedaan moet den „dijihad” voeren „fi sabil Allah”; op den weg van God*”⁶⁴ (The Qur'an mandates fighting against those who do not believe; a Muslim is obliged to undertake 'jihad' *fi sabil Allah*, in the path of God). On another page, the archives state declared: “...*De „prang sabil” was zijn werk, en zijn terke religieuze overtuiging begeesterde duizenden. Het krijgsvolk stroomde naar hem toe, en het ging blijmoedig den dood van den „sjahid tegemoet.*”⁶⁵ (The *prang sabil* was his mission, and his strong religious conviction inspired thousands. Fighters flocked to him, and they faced death as martyrs with a sense of elation). This demonstrates that the Acehnese resistance was not only political or territorial but was deeply embedded in the religious consciousness of the community.

In many regions, pesantren served as symbolic centers of resistance. These institutions were not merely places to learn Quranic recitation or classical texts but also hubs for character-building that instilled values of courage and independence. Kiai taught the importance of jihad in its broader sense—striving to uphold the dignity of religion and society. Networks among pesantren sometimes formed underground communication hubs, where information about harmful colonial policies could spread rapidly. Consequently, pesantren became moral fortresses that fostered critical awareness of colonial dominance. Through studying tafsir, fiqh, and Islamic history, students were educated to uphold their identity as Muslims, oppose injustice, and be ready to defend their communities against external pressures.⁶⁶

A prominent feature of the religious response was the emergence of Sufi orders (*tarekat*) as platforms for spiritual consolidation. Various Sufi orders, such as Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya, and Shattariyya, spread widely across the Nusantara, with members spanning multiple regions. Members of these orders were united by their spiritual vows (*bai'at*) and guidance, emphasizing religious consciousness and discipline.⁶⁷ During the colonial period, this solidarity served as a foundation for resistance. Practices such as collective zikr, recitation

of wirid, and ritual observances deepened spiritual awareness and instilled a spirit of cooperation and unity. Sufi leaders often extended their influence beyond spiritual domains into political or social realms, advising sultans and local leaders on preserving identity and pursuing justice.⁶⁸

On the cultural dimension, resistance manifested in rejecting colonial-imposed “homogenization.” Although Christianization missions were not always aggressive (especially under the Dutch, who focused more on economic matters), the presence of Western educational institutions, clothing styles, and European lifestyles gradually eroded local cultures.⁶⁹ In response, Muslim communities preserved traditional arts infused with Islamic values, such as gamelan music accompanied by religious lyrics, *wayang* performances with Islamic-themed narratives, and the use of Arabic-Malay script in regional literary works. These cultural activities became a subtle means of expressing local uniqueness that resisted colonial cultural “standards.”⁷⁰

Furthermore, cultural movements were evident in the rejection of colonial symbols. Some ulama issued prohibitions against wearing European-style uniforms or adopting behaviors associated with foreign lifestyles. While such attitudes were not uniformly strong across all regions, there was a general tendency to maintain distance from symbols perceived as linked to colonial power.⁷¹ This phenomenon reflected a “resistance by distance” tactic, where communities responded to colonial pressures by limiting the acceptance of symbols deemed harmful to their identity. By emphasizing a distinction between “us” as Muslims and “them” as foreigners, collective awareness was further solidified.

On another level, the development of Islamic identity also took an inclusive form, fostering cross-ethnic and cross-cultural cooperation among those who shared the Islamic faith. In this context, religious consciousness transcended geographic and cultural boundaries, creating new solidarities that extended across islands. Aceh, Banten, Makassar, and the Maluku Islands faced similar colonial challenges, prompting efforts to exchange information and support one another. This solidarity became more evident when leaders such as Sultan Agung of Mataram or Sultan Hasanuddin of Makassar sought moral and material backing from Muslim communities outside their territories. Although a comprehensive political unity had not yet formed, religious awareness fostered a sense of shared purpose among various Islamic kingdoms.

In some cases, the escalation of religious and cultural responses also triggered armed resistance justified by religious motivations. Religious leaders, witnessing colonial oppression, issued fatwas declaring jihad against policies perceived as oppressive. This spirit was evident in struggles such as Aceh’s resistance against the Portuguese, Banten’s opposition to the VOC, and Makassar’s fight against monopoly policies. Although these efforts often failed to achieve long-term military victories, the spirit of jihad profoundly strengthened collective identity.⁷² It framed resistance against colonialism as an economic or political struggle and a defense of religious dignity. This narrative extended to grassroots communities,

fostering pride in Islamic identity.

The presence of charismatic leaders who combined Islamic discourse with grassroots movements also played a pivotal role. Figures such as local ulama, Sufi teachers, and kiai pesantren often acted as unifying forces, bridging the political policies of sultans or kings with religious sentiments at the grassroots level. Through religious gatherings, deliberations, and inter-regional meetings, anti-colonial discourses were formulated into moral calls easily understood by society. At the same time, domestic spaces such as families, markets, and mosques became channels for spreading these ideas, instilling the belief that defending Islam meant safeguarding collective dignity, freedom, and honor.⁷³

A fundamental outcome of these religious and cultural responses was the emergence of a clearer “crystallization of Islamic identity.” Before the colonial period, Islam was already a way of life for most coastal communities, but it was not yet linked to political resistance. When colonialism infringed on economic rights and restricted religious freedom, Islam transformed into a symbol of solidarity that transcended the boundaries of kingdoms or ethnic groups. This development influenced the relationship between rulers and the populace. Sultans or kings who failed to defend Muslim interests often lost support, while those who championed Islam against injustice were regarded as true leaders.

Through this long process, religious and cultural resistance became not only defensive but also constructive. On one hand, it aimed to preserve original identities against foreign penetration; on the other, it built a “collective self-image” for the Muslim community. By internalizing Islamic values, the community was able to redefine itself not just as a collection of individuals in specific territories but as a united ummah bound by shared moral principles, ready to fight against injustice. This awareness laid the foundation for more systematic social movements in subsequent periods, particularly as modern nationalism began to spread in the Nusantara.⁷⁴

From the “Challenge and Response” theory perspective, the success of religious and cultural responses lay in the creative adaptation of Muslim communities to colonial pressures. They developed alternative spaces—such as pesantren, zikr assemblies, and cultural activities—that ensured the continuity of Islamic values amidst external changes. By maintaining religious rituals and modifying local cultures, Muslims built a shield of identity that prevented colonialism from completely dismantling their long-standing social systems. Paradoxically, this “pressured” situation contributed to the strengthening of religion as a guide for attitudes and behavior, deepening local social cohesion.

The religious and cultural responses of Muslim communities in the Nusantara to colonialism became a vital determinant in the history of resistance. Colonial interventions in religious realms prompted Muslims to integrate theological concepts with daily practices, creating symbolic resistance that was both effective and comprehensive. The series of actions—ranging from issuing fatwas, building pesantren and Sufi networks, to rejecting European culture—all reaffirmed Islam’s role as the anchor of collective

identity. Through these responses, Muslim communities internalized the idea that defending their religion also meant safeguarding collective dignity, freedom, and honor. As a result, Islam emerged not only as a spiritual “religion” but also as a “social force” that united, guided movements, and instilled the courage to resist oppression. This religious and cultural spirit only grew stronger under colonial pressures, paving the way for political and ideological transformations that culminated in the national movements of later centuries.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the interaction between European colonialism and Muslim communities in the Nusantara not only influenced the economic and political sectors but also shaped religious and cultural identities that became pillars of resistance against foreign domination. Through trade routes and the establishment of Islamic sultanates, the people of the Nusantara had already developed strong social, economic, and religious foundations before the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch. However, colonial domination—characterized by monopoly policies, divide et impera strategies, and cultural and religious assimilation—compelled Muslims to respond in various ways, ranging from physical resistance to the reinforcement of religious identity through pesantren institutions, ulama networks, and a spirit of solidarity.

The main findings indicate that Islam played a significant role as a symbol of resistance and a catalyst for collective consciousness. Consequently, religious awareness and commitment became even stronger, mainly since war carries the consequence of death, which in Islam is regarded as martyrdom, the most honorable form of death. Under colonial pressure, Islamic identity thus grew stronger and served as a foundation for social movements across various regions. This study also underscores the need for an interdisciplinary approach that simultaneously examines political, economic, and cultural aspects, given the complexity of historical dynamics in the Nusantara.

The implications of this study reveal that religion is not merely confined to the spiritual realm but can function as a social and political force driving resistance. In other words, Islam in the Nusantara demonstrated its capacity to unify culturally and motivate politically, triggering deeply rooted resistance within society. This research’s contribution lies in its comprehensive exploration of how the interaction between colonialism and Islam influenced the process of collective identity formation, which extended into the period of the national movement.

Future studies could focus on the specific experiences of Muslim communities in various regions with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and examine the role of international ulama networks that influenced the dynamics of religious thought in the Nusantara. Such studies could deepen understanding of the role of religion in different stages of historical processes, including the postcolonial era and modernization.

Viewed through the lens of Toynbee's Challenge and Response theory, these findings can be understood as a manifestation of how Muslim communities in the Nusantara transformed colonial domination into a catalyst for identity consolidation. Colonialism was a profound challenge threatening political, economic, and spiritual life. Yet the Muslim response—through resistance, religious institutions, and collective solidarity—was defensive and creative, strengthening Islamic identity as a mobilizing force and a foundation of long-term civilizational resilience.

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