



Rewriting the Islamic History of the Indian Ocean: A Post-Oriental Critique of Orientalist Historiography

Zubair Zafar Khan*

Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India, 202002

Email: zubairzafar@gmail.com

Syed Abdul Fazli

Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India, 202002

Email: fazilisyed@aliah.ac.in

Shahla Manzoor Baba

Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India, 202002

Email: shahlamanzoor@aliah.ac.in

Sameer Shafi Siddiqi

International Islamic University Islamabad, Islamabad, Pakistan, 44000

Email: sameersiddiqi@gmail.com

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Abstract

Orientalist historiography has long shaped understandings of Islamic history in the Indian Ocean region through a diffusionist paradigm that positions the Middle East as the epicenter of the spread of Islam and coastal communities in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa as passive recipients of external influences. Despite the development of global history and connected histories, several classical orientalist narratives still influence interpretations of the Islamization process in the region. This article aims to analyze the epistemological biases in orientalist historiography on Indian Ocean Islam and to reconstruct alternative understandings of the Islamization process, scholarly networks, and socio-religious mobility through a post-orientalist perspective. This research employs qualitative methods grounded in critical historiography, analyzing classical orientalist works and contemporary studies on maritime Islamic history through discourse analysis and epistemological critique. The results show that orientalist historiography tends to reproduce Eurocentric assumptions and a center-periphery model that simplifies the complexity of Islamic history in the Indian Ocean region. Islamization took place through transregional networks connecting major ports, the mobility of scholars, traders, and diaspora communities who played active roles in the exchange of ideas, religious practices, and intellectual authority. Interregional interactions have led to processes of adaptation, negotiation, and cultural hybridization that shape local Islamic traditions, all of which are by global networks. The Indian Ocean represents a multipolar and dialogical space of Islamic connectivity, while also offering a historiographical reconstruction that positions regional actors as central elements in the formation of maritime Islamic history.

Keywords: Orientalist Historiography; Post-Orientalism; Indian Ocean; Transregional Networks; Mobility of Scholars

Abstrak

Historiografi orientalis telah lama membentuk pemahaman tentang sejarah Islam di kawasan Samudra Hindia melalui paradigma difusionis yang menempatkan Timur Tengah sebagai pusat penyebaran Islam dan masyarakat pesisir Asia Selatan, Asia Tenggara, serta Afrika Timur sebagai penerima pasif pengaruh eksternal. Meskipun studi sejarah global dan *connected histories* telah berkembang, sejumlah narasi orientalis klasik masih memengaruhi interpretasi terhadap proses Islamisasi di kawasan ini. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bias epistemologis dalam historiografi orientalis tentang Islam Samudra Hindia serta merekonstruksi pemahaman alternatif mengenai proses Islamisasi, jaringan keilmuan, dan mobilitas sosial-keagamaan melalui perspektif pasca-orientalisme. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis kajian historiografi kritis dengan menganalisis karya-karya orientalis klasik dan studi kontemporer mengenai sejarah Islam maritim melalui pendekatan analisis wacana dan kritik epistemologis. Hasilnya menunjukkan historiografi orientalis cenderung mereproduksi asumsi eurosentris dan model pusat-pinggiran yang menyederhanakan kompleksitas sejarah Islam kawasan Samudra Hindia. Islamisasi berlangsung melalui jaringan transregional yang menghubungkan pelabuhan-pelabuhan utama, mobilitas ulama, pedagang, dan komunitas diaspora yang berperan sebagai agen aktif dalam pertukaran gagasan, praktik keagamaan, serta otoritas intelektual. Interaksi antarkawasan menghasilkan proses adaptasi, negosiasi, dan hibridisasi budaya yang membentuk corak Islam lokal tanpa terputus dari jaringan global. Samudra Hindia merupakan ruang konektivitas Islam yang multipolar dan dialogis, sekaligus menawarkan rekonstruksi historiografis yang menempatkan aktor regional sebagai unsur sentral dalam pembentukan sejarah Islam maritim.

Kata Kunci: Historiografi Orientalis; Pasca-Orientalisme; Samudra Hindia; Jaringan Transregional; Mobilitas Ulama

Introduction

The history of Indian Ocean Islam is a crucial area of global historical study because the region connects East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and Southeast Asia through centuries-long trade networks, the mobility of scholars, diasporas, and cultural exchanges (Bang, 2022). These cross-regional interactions gave rise to diverse forms of religiosity and demonstrate how the character of Islam was shaped through social, political, economic, and intellectual negotiations among maritime communities. However, the historiography of Indian Ocean Islam since the 19th century has largely been constructed through an orientalist framework that positions the Middle East as the sole center of Islamic development and the Indian Ocean coastal regions as peripheral recipients of influence (Green, 2025). The works of orientalists such as Snouck Hurgronje, Hamilton Gibb, and several colonial historians tend to explain Islamization as a process of cultural diffusion from the center to the periphery (Permata et al., 2025). This perspective creates a hierarchy of knowledge that separates the center from the periphery, while simultaneously limiting understanding of the complexity of maritime Islamic history.

The development of global historical studies demonstrates growing attention to the role of the Indian Ocean as a space for civilizational connectivity. A (1980) UNESCO report on the Indian Ocean's cultural routes places the region as one of the most dynamic corridors of societal interaction in world history. The International Institute for Asian Studies (2021) suggests that networks of scholars, traders, and the Muslim diaspora formed reciprocal transregional relationships rather than one-way cultural transfers. These findings are reinforced by the growing body of research on maritime history, which demonstrates the active involvement of local communities in knowledge production, the formation of religious authority, and the development of cross-regional intellectual networks (Fatimah et al., 2024; Gibbs & Juterczenka, 2022). The contrast between recent findings and the legacy of orientalist historiography reveals a significant epistemological gap. Narratives still oriented toward the center-periphery model fail to explain the multidirectional relationships among East Africa, Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia and neglect the agency of coastal communities in history. This situation calls for a re-evaluation of the historiographical foundations that have dominated the study of Indian Ocean Islam, adopting a more sensitive approach to power relations, representation, and local agency.

Several studies have made important contributions to understanding the history of Indian Ocean Islam. Formichi (2020) demonstrates that Muslim merchant networks served as a key link in the spread of Islam across the region. However, the focus of this study is more directed at socio-economic dynamics. Kooria (2020) emphasizes the importance of a global historical approach in understanding the connectivity of Indian Ocean Muslim societies. However, he has not specifically examined the historiographical biases that shape regional narratives. Rosyid (2021) finds that the Hadrami diaspora built religious and social networks that influenced the formation of local Islamic identities, while the epistemological dimension of critical colonial historiography has not received primary attention. Dar and Janbaz (2024) demonstrate the centrality of maritime trade in shaping regional economic and cultural relations. However, their analysis does not address the construction of historical knowledge that emerged from these relationships.

Shekhar (2025) reveals the cosmopolitan character of the Indian Ocean maritime world through interactions between ports and trading communities, while aspects of historiographic production remain outside the focus of this research. Saragih (2025) highlights global Islamic intellectual mobility as a crucial factor in the formation of transregional networks. However, his discussion focuses more on the modern period and does not yet link it to post-orientalist critiques. Rashid and Whitehead (2022) have critiqued the relationship between knowledge and power within the orientalist tradition, but have not specifically applied this critique to the reinterpretation of the historiography of Indian Ocean Islam. These studies enrich our understanding of trade, diaspora, intellectual mobility, and maritime

connectivity. In contrast, studies that systematically analyze the orientalist historiographical construction of Indian Ocean Islam from a post-orientalist perspective remain relatively limited.

This research starts from three main questions: how does orientalist historiography construct the history of Indian Ocean Islam; how does post-orientalist critique reveal the epistemological limitations of this construction; and how can an alternative historiographic model be formulated by emphasizing local agency, intellectual networks, diasporic mobility, and transregional relations? The research aims to identify the main characteristics of orientalist historiography, analyze the epistemological biases it contains, and formulate a framework for reinterpreting the historiography of Indian Ocean Islam from a post-orientalist perspective. The main argument of the research is that the dominance of orientalist historiography forms a structure of knowledge that positions coastal communities as objects of history and prioritizes center-periphery narratives. In contrast, the post-orientalist approach allows for a rereading of historical sources by positioning local actors as producers of knowledge and as key actors in socio-religious transformation. The theoretical contribution of this research is to strengthen the study of Islamic historiography and global history through a more inclusive analytical framework for the experiences of maritime communities. Its practical contribution is to provide an alternative perspective on the history of Islam in the Indian Ocean region that better represents the complexity of interactions among communities, while also broadening academic discussions on the production of historical knowledge beyond the dominant orientalist paradigm.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method, using a post-orientalist critical historiographical approach operationalized through discourse genealogy analysis, comparative historiographical criticism, and relational historical reconstruction to examine the production of knowledge about Islam in the Indian Ocean region while simultaneously constructing an alternative narrative centered on local agency and transregional connectivity. The research data comprises primary sources, including influential orientalist works on Islamization, trade, and Indian Ocean Muslim societies, as well as non-orientalist historical sources such as local chronicles, Muslim travelogues, religious manuscripts, and maritime historical documents. Secondary sources include journal articles and contemporary academic monographs on Islamic maritime history, '*ulamā*' networks, and post-orientalist studies. Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature review, with the establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria; literature searches in reputable academic databases using thematic keywords; selection based on relevance, academic influence, and source authority; and subsequent corpus classification, literature triangulation, and mapping of intertextual relationships. Data analysis was carried out in stages through historical-contextual reading,

identification of epistemological assumptions and patterns of orientalist representation, analysis of historical networks connecting the mobility of scholars, circulation of knowledge, and trade networks, then ending with a multi-level interpretative reconstruction that integrates local, regional, and transregional dimensions to produce a more comprehensive model of Indian Ocean Islamic historiography.

Results and Discussion

Orientalist Historiographical Constructions of Islam in the Indian Ocean

Orientalist historiography of Indian Ocean Islam developed within a nineteenth-century European scholarly tradition anchored in philology, historical positivism, and colonial scholarship. This tradition viewed the Islamic world as a unified civilization with a center of cultural and intellectual authority in the Middle East (Basu, 2023). The works of T. W. Arnold, Hamilton Gibb, Snouck Hurgronje, and several Dutch and British colonial scholars formed an interpretive framework that positioned the spread of Islam as a process of cultural transmission to the coastal regions of East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Andaya, 2022). This framework was born from an evolutionist assumption that viewed social change as moving through the flow of influence from the center of civilization to the receiving regions. This perspective resulted in a historical reading that positioned Indian Ocean societies as the objects of Islamic tradition's reception. At the same time, the primary agents of change were associated with the migration of scholars, Arab traders, and Middle Eastern religious networks.

The conceptual roots of this approach are closely related to the theory of cultural diffusion, which developed strongly in anthropology and history in the nineteenth century. The diffusion paradigm assumes the existence of a center of civilization that serves as a source of cultural innovation. At the same time, other regions are understood in terms of their capacity to receive and reproduce cultural elements imported from abroad (Vargo, Akaka, & Wieland, 2020). In studies of Indian Ocean Islam, this assumption has led to the use of Arabic chronicles, classical Muslim geographers' accounts, Middle Eastern travel reports, and colonial archives as primary sources for historical reconstruction. This hierarchy of sources privileges Arabic-language textual traditions while diminishing the significance of local traditions, vernacular manuscripts, collective memory, and material evidence. The consequences are evident in the tendency of older historiography to explain Islamization through Arab cultural movements without adequately addressing the processes of social negotiation, intellectual adaptation, and the formation of local religious authority.

Another tendency emerges through explanations that place maritime trade as the dominant factor in the spread of Islam. Orientalist historiography has often used Indian Ocean trade networks as a primary framework to explain the emergence of coastal Muslim communities (Prange, 2018). While trade played a significant

historical role, older works often reduced religious transformation to a logical consequence of interregional economic integration. This interpretive model explains the conversion of local populations through commercial gain, access to markets, and the need to build relationships with the international Muslim merchant community. This economic explanation fails to account for the intellectual dynamics that emerged from religious education, networks of the '*ulamā*', Sufi practices, political patronage, and the formation of Islamic social institutions. The reduction of economic factors also obscures the capacity of local communities to act as active agents in selecting, reinterpreting, and institutionalizing Islamic teachings in accordance with the social needs of each region. As a result, religion is positioned as a byproduct of economic exchange, rather than a knowledge system with its own transformative power.

The assumption of the centrality of the Middle East forms another important component of orientalist historiography. Many older studies view the legitimacy of Islamic scholarship as originating from key cities such as Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Baghdad, or Hadramawt (Lumbard, 2024). This perspective leads to the understanding that the development of Islam in the Indian Ocean region was a reproduction of intellectual traditions originating from these centers. Scholars in East Africa, India, the Indonesian archipelago, and other coastal regions are often portrayed as recipients of teachings transmitted through *hajj* networks, Arab family migrations, or cross-regional student-teacher relationships (Ali, 2025). Such readings neglect the formation of regional intellectual centers capable of independently producing knowledge, interpreting traditions, and establishing religious authority. Balachandran's (2023b) study of transregional scholarly networks demonstrates the existence of multiple, interconnected centers of knowledge without relying on a single source. This historical reality demonstrates the diversity of centers of Islamic knowledge production that a single hierarchical model cannot explain.

Orientalist constructions of the Swahili coast provide a concrete example of the influence of diffusionism and the center-periphery paradigm. Decades of colonial historiography explained East African Islamic identity through the migration of Arab traders, who were believed to have brought religion, language, and culture to the African coast. This narrative viewed Arab elements as the primary factor in the formation of Swahili society, often linking the legitimacy of Muslim identity to non-African origins (Łukaszyk, 2023). Contemporary archaeological findings, material history, and anthropological research reveal a more complex picture. The process of Islamization unfolded through long-standing interactions between African coastal communities, maritime trade networks, local political structures, and cross-regional cultural exchange. Swahili cities developed as social and economic centers with strong internal dynamics, not simply the result of Arab cultural transplantation (Baumanova, 2022). This evidence highlights the limitations of the older textual

approach, which relied too heavily on external sources and underutilized local material data and traditions.

Similar problems are evident in interpretations of the Islamization of South Asia. Several orientalist works explain the spread of Islam through the activities of Arab and Persian traders or Muslim diaspora communities operating along maritime and land routes (Michalopoulos, Naghavi, & Prarolo, 2018). Such explanations make important contributions to understanding interregional mobility, but often downplay the role of local institutions that shaped the long-term development of Islam. The regions of Gujarat, Malabar, Bengal, and the Deccan exhibit diverse historical experiences, involving political patronage, Sufi networks, religious education, intergroup relations, and urbanization dynamics (Balachandran, 2023a). This diversity is difficult to explain through a single, trade-centric model. Sheikh and Raja (2024) demonstrate that South Asian Muslim communities developed through a combination of layered social processes that unfolded in highly diverse local contexts.

Studies of Southeast Asia demonstrate a similar pattern of critique of orientalist historiography. The older literature often portrays Islam as a religion introduced by Arab or Persian traders through Indian Ocean commercial networks (Hall, 2014). This framework tends to position kingdoms, scholars, and local communities as recipients of external influences. Burhanuddin's (2025) research on Pasai, Aceh, Malacca, Java, and various religious centers in the archipelago reveals a far more complex process. Islamic educational networks, translation activities, the development of Islamic orders, diplomatic relations, and the production of local religious works played significant roles in shaping the region's Islamic traditions. Awass's (2026) study of networks of *'ulamā'* (Islamic scholars) demonstrates the multidirectional circulation of knowledge connecting the Middle East, India, East Africa, and Southeast Asia through dialogical relationships.

The development of global Islamic historiography over the past few decades has yielded fundamental critiques of orientalist constructions of the Indian Ocean. Approaches to connected histories, transregional history, maritime mobility, and intellectual networks demonstrate that the region functioned as a multicentric space of interaction, bringing together diverse communities, scholarly traditions, and forms of religious authority. This new perspective does not deny the importance of the Middle East, trade, or migration, but rather positions all these factors as part of an interconnected and continually negotiated network. This analytical framework opens space to recognize the roles of local *'ulamā'*, educational institutions, vernacular traditions, and regional knowledge production in shaping Islamic history.

Epistemological Bias in Orientalist Narratives of the Spread of Islam

The epistemological bias in orientalist historiography regarding the spread of Islam in the Indian Ocean can be understood as a set of assumptions about knowledge that determine how historical facts are selected, classified, and

interpreted. The early orientalist tradition was largely shaped by the diffusionist paradigm, which viewed religious change as the result of the migration of ideas and institutions from centers of civilization to other regions (Sa'di, 2021). This framework positioned the Middle East as the primary source of religious authority and the point of origin of Islamic transformation. Orientalist works from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries explained the Islamization of coastal Asia and Africa through the migration of Arab traders, the Hadrami diaspora, or the mobility of Persian groups (Brielle et al., 2023). Such explanatory models produced causal patterns that emphasized external factors and limited analytical space for local social dynamics.

The methodological choice to prioritize Arabic and Persian sources demonstrates how epistemological assumptions operate in the practice of historical research. The orientalist philological tradition generally linked knowledge authority to the proximity of sources to classical Islamic intellectual centers. As a result, local manuscripts, regional chronicles, oral traditions, religious genealogies, and non-textual forms of knowledge transmission are often relegated to a secondary role (Lumbard, 2025). This hierarchy of sources creates what has been called an imbalance of epistemic authority, a tendency to consider the representations of the Middle Eastern literati elite as more authentic than the historical experiences of coastal communities (Mellor, 2024). This archival selection process results in a historical construction that more readily captures the mobility of migrant traders and scholars than the dynamics of education, religious patronage relationships, or the social networks that developed between local groups. The resulting narrative ultimately presents Islamization as a one-way transfer of knowledge because the selected sources are designed to capture vertical connections toward centers of Islamic scholarship.

Another consequence is the marginalization of regional scholars' agency in the formation of coastal Islamic traditions. J. C. van Leur (1955) and Snouck Hurgronje (1906) portrayed local scholars as intermediaries for teachings originating from outside the region without adequately addressing their intellectual capacities as knowledge producers. Such representations ignore the historical realities demonstrated by numerous recent studies of the '*ulamā*' networks of Southeast Asia, Gujarat, Malabar, East Africa, and Hadramawt. Studies by Mahrus et al. (2025), Ikbal et al. (2024), Pervez (2023), and Lumbard (2025) demonstrate the active role of regional '*ulamā*' in the compilation of religious texts, the formation of educational curricula, the development of Islamic legal authority, and the production of intellectual traditions that influenced far beyond their regions of origin. Post-orientalist critique places these two in a mutually constitutive historical relationship. This perspective presents Islamization as the result of a complex interaction between transregional mobility and the social creativity of coastal

communities, which developed forms of religious authority suited to their respective environments.

The nature of Indian Ocean intellectual networks demonstrates the limitations of the linear diffusion model that long dominated much of orientalist historiography. Engseng Ho (2006) demonstrates that major ports served as hubs for the exchange of ideas, manuscripts, legal practices, and educational traditions that moved in multiple directions. The connections between Aceh, Gujarat, Malabar, Mecca, Zanzibar, and Hadramawt formed a space for the circulation of knowledge that did not follow a center-to-periphery pattern (Balachandran, 2023b). The frameworks of connected histories and transregional history explain this mobility as a multidirectional process that resulted in reciprocal transformations between Muslim communities (Ricci, 2011; Subrahmanyam, 1997). Epistemological criticism arose when orientalist historiography interpreted the entire network as an expansion of Middle Eastern influence without examining the intellectual contributions of regional centers. An overly origin-oriented reading focused attention on the source of influence, while the processes of reproduction, reinterpretation, and innovation of knowledge received less analytical space.

Representations of local culture also demonstrate how epistemological categories influence the construction of history. Clifford Geertz (1960) understood regional cultural elements as remnants of pre-Islamic traditions that persisted after the arrival of a new religion. This perspective stems from normative assumptions about the existence of a purer form of Islam closer to its center of origin. This analytical framework complicates understanding the creative processes that enabled Muslim communities to integrate local cultural symbols into religious practices. Studies by Robert W. Hefner (1997) and Kevin M. Fogg (2012) on vernacular Islam, lived religion, and localization demonstrate that the formation of religious identity occurs through continuous adaptation to social contexts. Coastal religious traditions cannot be understood as deviations from a particular ideal model, as religious practices develop through the interaction among texts, social experiences, political structures, and community needs.

Another epistemological dimension emerges through the formation of a hierarchy of center and periphery in the writing of global Islamic history. These categories are not simply geographical descriptions, but rather conceptual devices that determine who is considered to produce knowledge and who merely reproduces it. H. A. R. Gibb (1947), Gustave E. von Grunebaum (1955), and Bernard Lewis (1964) assessed the development of coastal scholarship in light of its proximity to Middle Eastern traditions, often interpreting regional innovations as adaptations to existing models. Critics such as Sugata Bose (2006) and Engseng Ho (2006) point out the limitations of this approach, as it ignores the fact that intellectual centers are formed through constantly changing historical relationships. Global history and oceanic history perspectives position the Indian Ocean as a space

of interaction that simultaneously produced multiple centers of knowledge (Kusimba, 2020). This approach allows for the reading of manuscripts, educational institutions, networks of scholars, and Islamic legal practices as part of a process of knowledge production that took place through interregional relations.

The relationship between epistemological assumptions, research methods, source selection, and historiographical outcomes is evident through the emergence of four interrelated bias patterns. Diffusion bias encourages the search for external origins as the primary explanation for social change. Textualist bias prioritizes certain sources while diminishing the legitimacy of other forms of knowledge. A centralist bias positions the Middle East as the dominant reference point for all Islamic developments. A hierarchical bias creates a separation between centers of knowledge production and the regions they influence. The combination of these four patterns forms a narrative that presents Islamization as a process of religious migration from one region to another without adequate space for the production of meaning at the local level. Post-orientalist analysis offers a different reading by positioning mobility, exchange, adaptation, and negotiation as simultaneous elements. This approach opens the possibility of understanding the history of Indian Ocean Islam as a process of intellectual world formation arising from complex transregional relationships.

Post-Orientalist Deconstruction of Indian Ocean Islamic Historiography

Post-Orientalism positions the historiography of Indian Ocean Islam as an arena for knowledge production shaped by power relations, representational practices, and the selection of historical sources. This framework unpacks the conceptual categories that underpin historical narratives about the Islamization of maritime Asia-Africa (Green, 2025). Categories such as center-periphery, cultural diffusion, and passive reception are examined through a critical examination of orientalist works that view the Middle East as the sole source of historical change. Post-orientalist readings demonstrate that these categories operate through a hierarchical logic that positions Indian Ocean coastal societies as objects of religious transformation. Historiographic analysis reveals that the center-periphery construct emerged as an interpretive device that determined which actors assumed central positions and which were marginalized. Deconstruction is directed at the structure of these categorizations, shifting attention to the processes of authority formation, the circulation of ideas, and the production of meaning that took place through transregional maritime networks.

The assumption of diffusionism becomes a primary target of criticism because it constructs the narrative of Islamization as a linear movement of religious teachings toward regions considered peripheral. The logic of diffusion presupposes the existence of an authentic center that produces knowledge and a periphery that serves as a space of reception (Zhang, Si, & Yu, 2025). Studies of port chronicles, religious manuscripts, and records of scholarly mobility reveal a different historical

pattern. The exchange of ideas occurred through a multilayered network of circulation connecting East Africa, Arabia, India, Southeast Asia, and various Muslim diaspora communities (Azra, 2001). These interactions resulted in processes of meaning translation, institutional adaptation, and negotiation of religious authority that a one-way transmission model cannot explain. The perspectives of networks, connectivity, and entanglement open up a reading that positions Islamization as the result of interactions among maritime nodes that mutually influence one another.

The economic determinism that has long dominated some orientalist historiography also requires critical evaluation through readings that link trade mobility to the formation of knowledge communities. The old narrative tended to explain Islamization as a direct consequence of commercial activity, thereby reducing religious change to a mechanical effect of maritime market integration (Hall, 2014). Post-orientalist studies demonstrate that trade served as a medium of connectivity, enabling the movement of people, texts, ritual practices, and religious authority. Merchant networks often intersected with networks of *'ulamā'*, tarekat teachers, manuscript copyists, and students moving between ports (Wang, Ding, Liu, & Zheng, 2025). This situation demonstrates the close relationship between economics and knowledge production without reducing either element to a single factor. Deconstruction targets simplistic causal assumptions that ignore the complexity of social relations. Islamization emerged through the establishment of spaces for interaction that brought together economic interests, religious aspirations, and intellectual exchange within interconnected historical configurations.

Post-orientalist critiques also target the use of colonial categories that long served as a framework for classifying Muslim societies in the Indian Ocean. Colonial archives shaped racial, ethnographic, and administrative categories that were then used as the basis for historical interpretation. Categories such as Arab, indigenous, migrant, or coastal communities were often treated as fixed identities with clearly defined boundaries (Linebaugh & Lowry, 2021). A critical examination of the archival production process demonstrates that such classifications emerged from the administrative needs of colonial power, rather than from a complete representation of social reality. Post-orientalist readings treat archives as knowledge technologies that produce particular forms of legibility for Muslim societies (Ali, 2025). This approach allows the identification of sources marginalized by the dominance of colonial classifications.

The agency perspective was developed not as a simple reversal of the passive image of local communities, but rather as an attempt to explain the historical process of shaping collective action. Orientalist historiography often positions local communities as recipients of change brought about by external actors (Gani, 2022). Post-orientalist readings highlight the varied social positions occupied by traders, religious scholars, political elites, religious networks, women, diaspora groups, and

port communities. Each actor possessed a distinct capacity to direct the production of religious meaning and construct social legitimacy (Seland, 2013). This approach avoids homogenizing local categories by exploring the relationship between agency and surrounding social structures. Islamization is understood as an ongoing process of negotiation among groups with differing interests and resources.

The social and intellectual networks of the Indian Ocean provide a crucial foundation for deconstructing assumptions about the centralization of scholarly authority. Orientalist historiography often positions Middle Eastern centers as the exclusive source of intellectual legitimacy (Yazdani & Ghaemmaghami, 2023). Studies on the mobility of scholars, student travel, manuscript circulation, and relations between educational institutions reveal a more fluid pattern. Authority was established through interactions between network nodes spread across various ports and centers of learning. Scholarly legitimacy emerged through community recognition, text exchange, the reproduction of *sanads* (transmission line), and active engagement in cross-regional intellectual spaces. The frameworks of connected histories and oceanic Islam demonstrate that knowledge production occurred through multidirectional relationships linking various Muslim regions (Awass, 2026). This network analysis debunks the assumption of a single center of authority and reveals the diversity of locations of Islamic knowledge production in the Indian Ocean region.

Rereading historical sources became a key methodological instrument in the deconstruction of old historiography. This reading strategy was carried out through discursive analysis, reading against the dominant flow of sources, and exploring intertextual relationships between local chronicles, religious manuscripts, trade archives, and travelogues. This method enabled the identification of social voices previously obscured by orientalist interpretive frameworks. Local chronicles, initially read as evidence of passive acceptance of external influences, could take on different meanings when situated within the context of competition for authority, the formation of community identity, and strategies for political legitimacy. Religious manuscripts also demonstrate a process of conceptual adaptation that reflects the intellectual creativity of Muslim communities in maritime regions. Such readings expand interpretive possibilities by revealing layers of meaning previously reduced by orientalist analytical categories.

Reconstruction of Islamic Historiography of the Indian Ocean from a Transregional Perspective

The reconstruction of the historiography of Indian Ocean Islam requires an analytical shift from a diffusion framework to a polycentric approach that places connectivity as the primary unit of historical reading. A transregional perspective not only shifts the focus of study from territorial boundaries to transregional networks but also transforms the way we understand the formation of authority, the production of knowledge, and the circulation of religious practices. This framework

departs from the assumptions of global historiography that position mobility as a constitutive factor of social change, allowing Islamic history to be understood through the interconnectedness of mutually shaping maritime nodes (Michalopoulos et al., 2018). The coastal ports of East Africa, Hadramawt, Gujarat, Malabar, Sri Lanka, Aceh, and Malacca served as hubs of interaction that generated historical dynamics through the exchange of people, commodities, texts, and ideas (Horton, Boivin, & Crowther, 2021). This perspective allows for a reading of Indian Ocean Islam as a space of connection shaped by multilayered processes of circulation, rather than as the result of a single expansion moving from one center to another.

Maritime trade networks provided the social infrastructure that enabled interregional connectivity across the Indian Ocean. Transregional historiography views trade as a mechanism that integrated Muslim communities through recurring relationships across generations (Mondini, 2025). Sebastian Prange (2018), Michael Pearson (1998), and Sugata Bose (2006) demonstrate that maritime ports were cosmopolitan spaces of interaction in which identities, legal norms, and religious practices were continuously reproduced. Trade relations created networks of trust that facilitated the formation of cross-ethnic Muslim communities through legal instruments, commercial contracts, and transactional ethics rooted in Islamic tradition. This perspective yields new historiographical readings, as trade is understood as an arena for the production of social structures that underpin the continuity of religious networks.

The mobility of scholars demonstrates the intellectual dimension that made maritime networks a medium for the transmission of knowledge. Transregional approaches position scholarly travel, *sanad* networks, the circulation of manuscripts, and religious correspondence as key mechanisms for the formation of epistemic communities across regions (Awass, 2026). Azyumardi Azra (2004), Nile Green (2020), and Ronit Ricci (2011) demonstrate the interconnectedness of centers of Islamic learning through the movement of teachers, students, texts, and scholarly authorities across geographical boundaries. Mecca, Medina, Hadramawt, Gujarat, Aceh, and various Southeast Asian ports formed an intellectual ecology that enabled the continuous reproduction of knowledge. Scholarly travels resulted in the exchange of interpretive methods, legal traditions, and educational practices, which then interacted with local social conditions. A focus on the mobility of scholars shifted the orientation of historiography from local studies to an analysis of knowledge networks that moved across regions.

Diaspora communities served as permanent connectors, maintaining continuity in social, economic, and religious relations across regions. Transregional historiography uses diaspora as an analytical category to explain processes of identity formation and authority that transcend political and geographical boundaries (Ventura, 2024). Engseng Ho's (2006) study of the Hadrami diaspora

demonstrates how networks of kinship, trade, education, and religious legitimacy created a social space connected through various Indian Ocean ports. These mechanisms enabled the movement of capital, information, manuscripts, and religious figures across extensive maritime networks. Interactions between diaspora groups and local communities led to a process of identity negotiation that gave rise to diverse forms of Islam while maintaining connections to the broader network.

Cultural exchange adds another dimension, demonstrating the complexity of historical processes across the Indian Ocean. The frameworks of connected histories and cultural circulation explain how language, symbols, ritual practices, Sufi traditions, and forms of material expression moved through maritime networks and adapted to various social contexts (Aragon, 2023). Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997) and Fahad Bishara (2017) demonstrate that cultural circulation did not occur as a linear transfer but rather as a process of translation that produced new forms through repeated interactions among communities. Coastal mosque architecture, Sufi traditions, the use of Arabic in religious spaces, and the development of local Islamic literature reflect this process of connection that produced a plurality of religious expressions. A focus on cultural circulation allows historiography to move beyond essentialist approaches that seek a single origin for a tradition. Indian Ocean Islam emerges from multidirectional interactions that brought together East African, Arab, Persian, Indian, and Southeast Asian elements in a continuous process of cultural formation.

The integration of trade, the mobility of scholars, diaspora, and cultural circulation produces a network historiographic model that differs from the center-periphery framework. This approach views historical change as the result of the interaction among various nodes, each with its own capacity to produce knowledge and authority. Coastal ports served as nodes connecting economic, intellectual, and religious networks, shaping historical dynamics through horizontal relationships among actors and communities. A network perspective demonstrates that centers of Islamic activity were not concentrated in a single region. Aceh, Gujarat, Kilwa, Hadramawt, Malabar, and Malacca served as centers that interacted with one another through flexible relationships (Arifinsyah, Dalimunthe, & Riza, 2025). This heterarchical model offers an alternative to historiography that has traditionally positioned specific regions as the primary source of historical change. Network reading allows the identification of multiple channels of influence operating simultaneously, resulting in a more complex pattern of Islamic development than the traditional linear scheme.

The polycentric character of Indian Ocean Islam demonstrates the existence of numerous interconnected religious and intellectual centers without rigid subordination. Each center possessed the capacity to produce knowledge, establish authority, and influence other regions through a constantly evolving maritime

network. A polycentric perspective explains how religious legitimacy, Islamic education, trade, and identity formation developed through dynamic interactions among nodes (Saada, 2023). This framework also allows for a reconsideration of the periodization of Islamic history, as historical change does not always follow the same developmental trajectory across all regions. Temporal and spatial variations are crucial to the analysis, allowing Islamic history to be understood as the result of the interconnectedness of various centers of activity that transformed different rhythms.

Transregionally based historiographic reconstruction produces conceptual contributions that position connectivity, mobility, and circulation as primary categories for analyzing Islamic history. This framework integrates approaches from oceanic history, network history, connected histories, and mobility studies into a reading that simultaneously explains the relationships among actors, institutions, and maritime spaces. Its historiographic significance lies in its ability to explain the formation of Islam through multidimensional interactions involving trade networks, intellectual communities, diasporas, and cultural exchange within a single, interconnected historical system. This perspective opens new interpretative opportunities for historical sources by making interregional relations the primary focus of analysis. Indian Ocean Islam emerged as a product of global connectivity shaped by diverse centers of activity, mobility patterns, and centuries-long social negotiation processes. This formulation yields a historiographical model that bridges local, regional, and global history through a more comprehensive analytical framework relevant to contemporary debates in Islamic historiography.

Conclusion

The effort to rewrite the history of Islam in the Indian Ocean region emphasizes the main contribution of post-orientalist critique by dismantling Eurocentric assumptions that have framed Islam as a peripheral entity in global maritime history. Historiographical studies reveal a pattern of representation that positions the process of Islamization as the result of a one-way diffusion from Islamic centers to the periphery. At the same time, reciprocal relations among ports, the circulation of scholars, trade, the transmission of knowledge, cultural exchange, and the formation of religious authority across regions have received insufficient attention. The main findings indicate that the development of Islam is better understood through a network of maritime connectivity linking East Africa, Hadramawt, Gujarat, the Indian coast, and Southeast Asia, sustained by the mobility of actors, educational institutions, manuscripts, and religious practices that unfolded in multiple directions and in a continuous manner. Theoretical implications encourage a shift in analysis from the center-periphery model to a network perspective, while practical implications emphasize the use of multilingual sources and a cross-regional approach. Limitations of this study lie in the dominance of secondary literature in specific languages, uneven regional representation, and

the absence of exploration of port archives and primary manuscripts. The next research agenda needs to focus on mapping the inter-port cleric network, the mobility of the Muslim diaspora, and analyzing primary sources across regions to strengthen the historical reconstruction of Indian Ocean Islam.

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Author Contribution Statement

ZZK contributed to the conceptualization of the study, design of the methodology, data analysis, writing the main draft, editing, and correspondence related to the manuscript. SAF contributed to data collection and verification, literature review, and partial drafting of the manuscript. SMB contributed to the analysis and interpretation of results, the validation of scientific substance, and the critical review of the manuscript. SSS contributed to the refinement of the argumentation, language editing, checking for citation and formatting consistency, and final review before the manuscript was accepted for publication. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

This manuscript was prepared without any conflict of interest, whether financial, professional, institutional, or personal, that could influence the research process, analysis, data interpretation, manuscript preparation, or publication of the research results. The entire manuscript was prepared independently, in accordance with the principles of academic integrity and scientific objectivity.

AI Usage Statement

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI) to a limited extent, only to improve the manuscript's language quality, grammar, and formatting. AI was not used to generate scientific content, including conceptualization, analysis, data interpretation, findings, arguments, ideas, or research conclusions. The entire scientific content of the manuscript is the result of the thinking, analysis, and full responsibility of the authors, who also verified the entire manuscript before submission for publication.

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