Economic Migration and Islamic Development in Sabah: The Contributions of Muslim Migrant Communities

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ABSTRACT

Economic migration has long shaped the social and economic landscape of Sabah, particularly through the movement of workers and traders from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. While existing studies have largely examined economic migration in relation to labour, development, security, and social issues, its religious implications have received comparatively limited attention. This study examines the contributions of Muslim migrant communities to Islamic development in Sabah. It adopts a qualitative approach using content analysis of scholarly literature, government publications, official statistics, and other relevant documentary sources. The analysis focuses on how the presence of Muslim economic migrants has contributed, directly and indirectly, to the development of Islam within Sabah's changing social and religious environment. The findings indicate that economic migration has contributed to Islamic development through several interrelated processes: historical commercial mobility that facilitated Muslim contact with local communities, the demographic presence of Muslim migrants, their participation in Sabah's socioeconomic structure, and their incorporation into the wider Muslim communal environment. These contributions should not be interpreted as the sole cause of Sabah's Islamic development, which has also been shaped by local conversion, natural population growth, da'wah activities, institutional development, and other forms of mobility. The study demonstrates that economic migration should not be understood solely as a labour phenomenon because migrants also carry religious identities, practices, and social networks into destination societies. By highlighting this religious dimension, the study broadens the understanding of migration and Islamic development in Sabah beyond predominantly economic, political, and security-oriented discussions.

Keywords: Economic migration, Islamic development, Muslim migrants, Sabah, migration studies

INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been an important feature of Sabah's demographic, economic, and social development. Its geographical position within maritime Southeast Asia, proximity to Indonesia and the southern Philippines, and historical connections with neighboring territories have facilitated cross-border mobility for centuries. Long before the establishment of modern territorial boundaries, Sabah attracted traders and mobile communities from China, the Arab world, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and other parts of the region. Economic considerations became increasingly prominent during the period of the British North Borneo Chartered Company, when foreign labour was recruited to support plantation, mining, construction, and other developing sectors. This reliance on migrant labour continued after the formation of Malaysia as Sabah expanded its economy and required workers for sectors in which local labour supply was insufficient (Yusin, 1990; Dollah & Abdullah, 2015).

Economic migration therefore represents one of the most significant forms of population movement into Sabah. Indonesian and Filipino migrants, in particular, have played important roles in supplying labour to agriculture, plantations, construction, manufacturing, fisheries, domestic services, and other labour-intensive sectors. Previous research has consequently examined migration in Sabah primarily in relation to labour demand, economic development, irregular migration, remittances, recruitment processes, security, and the socio-political consequences of large-scale cross-border mobility. Wan Hassan et al. (2008), for example, demonstrated that Indonesian migration had significant implications for Sabah's political economy, while Mulia et al. (2015) highlighted the continuing dependence of several economic sectors on migrant labour and the challenges associated with formal recruitment. Wan Hassan et al. (2010) similarly showed that employment opportunities remained a major factor sustaining repeated migration to Sabah.

The importance of migration is also reflected in Sabah's contemporary demographic landscape. According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census, Islam was the most widely professed religion in Sabah, accounting for 69.6 per cent of the population, while Christianity represented 24.7 per cent and Buddhism 5.1 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Such figures reflect a religious landscape that has developed through multiple historical processes, including conversion, internal mobility, natural population growth, institutional development, and migration. Economic migration should therefore not be treated as an exclusively labour-related phenomenon. Migrants are more than a source of labour. They also bring their religious identities, social practices, cultural traditions, and community networks into the societies where they live and work.

This point is particularly relevant to Muslim economic migrants in Sabah. Many migrants arriving from neighbouring Indonesia and the southern Philippines originate from Muslim-majority or Muslim-populated communities. Although their principal motivation for migration may be employment and economic advancement rather than religious propagation, their physical presence alongside their religious identities, cultural heritages, and Islamic practices nonetheless shapes the social and religious dynamics of the Muslim community. They become part of local Muslim populations, participate in religious practices, establish or sustain social networks, and interact with existing Islamic institutions. Thus, the religious footprint of economic migration is driven not by organized *da'wah* efforts, but rather by the everyday presence, settlement, and social engagement of Muslim migrant communities.

Nevertheless, this religious dimension has received considerably less attention than the economic, political, social, and security dimensions of migration in Sabah. Existing scholarship has extensively discussed migrant labour, irregular migration, recruitment, remittances, border management, and the economic dependence of particular sectors on foreign workers (Wan Hassan et al., 2008; Wan Hassan et al., 2010; Mulia et al., 2015; Sayed Mahadi et al., 2017). Earlier studies of Islam in Sabah have examined the historical development of Islam, *da'wah*, institutions, and Muslim political and social development, but the specific relationship between economic migration and Islamic development has remained comparatively underexplored (Hajimin, 2021; Hajimin et al., 2022; Mat Zain & Omar, 2003; Yusin, 1990).

This limited attention to the religious dimension of economic migration highlights a gap in the existing literature on Sabah. If economic migrants are examined only in terms of employment, productivity, remittances, documentation, or security, an important dimension of their presence may be overlooked. Economic migration can simultaneously produce economic and non-economic consequences. For Muslim migrant communities, one such consequence concerns their participation in the demographic and social reproduction of Muslim communities and their contribution to the broader environment in which Islamic religious life develops. The issue is therefore not whether economic migrants enter Sabah specifically to develop Islam, but how their presence as Muslim economic migrants may contribute, directly or indirectly, to Islamic development within the state.

Accordingly, this study examines the contributions of Muslim migrant communities associated with economic migration to Islamic development in Sabah. It specifically seeks to identify the forms through which Muslim economic migrants have contributed to the religious and communal development of Islam and to explain how these contributions extend beyond their conventional role as labour migrants. By focusing on the religious dimension of economic migration, the study complements existing migration scholarship in Sabah and broadens

the understanding of migration as a multidimensional process whose consequences may extend beyond labour markets and economic development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using content analysis to examine the relationship between economic migration and Islamic development in Sabah. The method was selected because the study focuses on interpreting historical, demographic, social, and religious developments documented in existing written sources rather than measuring relationships quantitatively. Content analysis is particularly suitable for identifying recurring themes, patterns, and relationships across different categories of documentary evidence.

The data were obtained entirely from documentary sources. These included academic journal articles, books, book chapters, government reports, official statistics, institutional publications and other relevant scholarly materials. Particular attention was given to documents concerning economic migration to Sabah, migrant labour, Indonesian and Filipino migrant communities, Muslim population change, the historical development of Islam in Sabah, and the participation of migrant communities in Muslim social and religious life.

Documents were selected purposively according to their relevance to the research objective. Three principal criteria guided the selection. First, the source had to contain information directly related to migration into Sabah, particularly migration motivated by employment, trade, or other economic considerations. Second, priority was given to materials that provided information on Muslim migrant communities or on the religious and social consequences of population mobility. Third, sources discussing the historical and institutional development of Islam in Sabah were included where they helped explain the broader context within which the contributions of Muslim migrants could be understood. Sources dealing exclusively with migration issues unrelated to the religious dimension were used only when necessary to establish the wider migration context.

The analysis was conducted through systematic reading, classification, and thematic interpretation of the selected materials. Relevant information was first identified and organised according to the major issues addressed by the study. The data were subsequently compared across sources to distinguish between the migrants' primary economic functions and the broader religious and communal consequences associated with their presence in Sabah. Recurring evidence was grouped into thematic categories reflecting the forms through which Muslim economic migrants contributed to Islamic development.

The analysis also distinguished between direct and indirect contributions. Direct contributions refer to forms of participation explicitly connected to Muslim religious and communal activities, whereas indirect contributions refer to consequences arising from migrants' demographic presence, settlement, social interaction, and participation in the wider Muslim community. This distinction is important because economic migrants generally move primarily for employment and livelihood rather than for religious propagation.

To strengthen the reliability of the analysis, information was compared across different types of documentary sources wherever possible. Greater emphasis was placed on academic publications, official statistical records, government documents, and established historical sources, while interpretative claims were assessed in relation to the broader documentary evidence. Through this approach, the study provides a focused analysis of economic migration as a phenomenon that may generate religious and social consequences beyond its immediate labour and economic functions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis reveals that the contribution of economic migration to Islamic development in Sabah operates operates through four interconnected dimensions: the historical relationship between commercial mobility and the transmission of Islam, the demographic presence of Muslim migrant communities, their participation in Sabah's economic and social structures, and the wider reproduction of Muslim communal life. Collectively, these four dimensions demonstrate that economic migration is not merely a movement of labor to fulfill economic imperatives, but one that carries broader implications for the growth and social reproduction of religious life among the Muslim population in Sabah. In this regard, economic migration can be understood as a

conduit contributing to Islamic development through historical, demographic, and socio-religious interactions, even though such mobility was originally motivated by economic interest. However, the contribution of economic migrants should not be viewed as a monocausal factor driving Islamic development in the state. Rather, it must be understood in relation to other interacting dynamics, including local conversion, natural population growth, the development within a broader process of Islamic development involving local conversion, natural population growth, the development of religious institution, organized *da'wah* activities, and various other forms of population mobility.

Historical Continuity: Maritime Trade as an Early Conduit of Islamization

The relationship between economic mobility and the development of Islam in Sabah predates contemporary labour migration. Sabah's location within maritime Southeast Asia and its abundance of natural resources made it an important destination and transit point for traders from surrounding regions. Historical accounts record commercial connections involving China, India, Brunei, the Sulu archipelago, Indonesia and traders originating from the Arab world. These trading relationships existed before the establishment of modern territorial boundaries and subsequently expanded under colonial economic development (Yusin, 1990).

The significance of these commercial networks for Islamic development lies in the fact that economic and religious mobility were not always mutually exclusive. Historical studies of Islam in Sabah associate the early transmission of Islam partly with Muslim traders and religious figures moving through regional maritime networks. Yusin (1990) and Mat Zain and Omar (2003) identify external Muslim contacts as important to the early development of Islam in Sabah. Muslim commercial movements were particularly significant in coastal areas where contact with neighbouring Muslim societies was more intensive.

Some Muslim traders did not function exclusively as economic actors. Commercial mobility provided opportunities for interaction with local communities and, in certain cases, became a channel through which Islamic ideas and practices were introduced. This does not mean that all Muslim traders were da'wah agents or that trade alone explains the Islamisation of Sabah. Rather, it demonstrates the difficulty of separating economic migration completely from its social and religious consequences. A migrant may move primarily for commercial reasons while simultaneously carrying religious identity, practices, and networks into the destination society.

This historical pattern provides an important foundation for understanding contemporary economic migration. The contribution of Muslim economic migrants to Islamic development should not necessarily be measured according to whether they migrated with an explicit intention to propagate Islam. Their significance may instead emerge through social contact, community formation, and continued participation in Muslim religious life after migration.

Demographic Mechanics: Migration and the Expansion of the Muslim Social Base

Economic migration became increasingly institutionalised during the colonial period. Under the British North Borneo Chartered Company, foreign labour was recruited to support plantations, agriculture, construction, fisheries, manufacturing, and other economic activities. The demand for migrant labour persisted beyond the colonial period and became increasingly important as Sabah's economic development continued to rely on labour-intensive industries, particularly agriculture and plantations (Dollah & Abdullah, 2015).

Indonesia and the Philippines became especially important sources of migrant labour. Wan Hassan et al. (2008) demonstrate the significant involvement of Indonesian migrants in Sabah's economic structure, while Mulia et al. (2015) confirm the continuing importance of Indonesian workers in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and services. Sayed Mahadi et al. (2018) similarly show the durability of cross-border labour movement from Indonesia to Tawau.

The religious significance of this labour mobility derives partly from the social characteristics of the populations involved. Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, while substantial Muslim communities are located in the southern Philippines. Consequently, sustained migration from neighbouring territories has brought Muslim migrants into Sabah alongside migrants of other religious backgrounds. Wan Hassan et al. (2010) note that a

substantial share of migrants from the southern Philippines in Sabah are Muslims, while Indonesian migrant populations include several communities with long-standing Muslim identities.

At the same time, the increase in Sabah's Muslim population must be interpreted carefully. Census records show that Muslims constituted approximately 40.1 per cent of Sabah's population in 1970 and around 65.4 per cent in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). By the 2020 Population and Housing Census, Islam accounted for 69.6 per cent of Sabah's population, compared with Christianity at 24.7 per cent and Buddhism at 5.1 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). These figures should not be interpreted as evidence that economic migration alone produced Sabah's contemporary Muslim majority. Religious conversion among indigenous communities, natural population growth, internal migration, historical settlement, and other forms of international migration also affected the state's religious composition.

The evidence therefore suggests that Muslim economic migration contributed to Sabah's Muslim demographic presence (Hajimin, 2021), although it was not the sole factor shaping the state's religious composition. Demographic presence does not automatically equal Islamic development. Nevertheless, population size has implications for the sustainability of religious communities because Muslim populations generate continuing requirements for places of worship, religious learning, halal food, religious observance, family and community networks, and Islamic social services. Economic migration can therefore affect the environment in which Muslim communal life operates, even when migrants themselves are not formal religious actors.

Socioeconomic Integration and the Infrastructure of Communal Life

A third finding concerns the economic functions performed by migrant communities. Studies consistently demonstrate the structural importance of migrant labour to Sabah's economy. Indonesian and Filipino workers have filled employment gaps in plantations, agriculture, construction, fisheries, manufacturing, domestic services, and other labour-intensive sectors. Wan Hassan et al. (2010) note that employment opportunities remained one of the main factors sustaining repeated migration to Sabah. Mulia et al. (2015) similarly show that labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and services created continued demand for migrant workers.

Dollah and Abdullah (2015) situate this dependence on foreign workers within Sabah's longer economic history. Their analysis highlights the relationship between economic development and recurring labour shortages from the colonial period onwards, and emphasises the significant role of Indonesian labour in the functioning of Sabah's economy. Sector-specific research provides further evidence. Mohd Ariff and Mohammad Raduan (2008), for example, document the prominent involvement of Bugis communities in the bagang fishing industry on the east coast of Sabah, while Sayed Mahadi et al. (2017) examine income, living costs, and remittance behaviour among Indonesian migrant workers.

From the perspective of this study, such findings are significant because the economic contribution of Muslim migrants cannot be isolated entirely from the development of Muslim communities. Migrants participate not merely as labour inputs but as consumers, workers, traders, and social actors within the places where they reside. Their earnings support households; their consumption generates local economic activity; and their social networks connect labour markets with communities inside and outside Sabah.

Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to label the entire economic contribution of migrant workers as a specifically Islamic contribution. Migrant labour benefits Sabah's broader economy irrespective of workers' religious affiliation. The religious dimension emerges when Muslim economic migrants participate in the socioeconomic life of Muslim communities and when their economic presence helps sustain the social environment within which Muslim communal institutions and practices operate. Islamic development does not occur only through explicitly religious activities; Muslim communities also require economic resources, employment, markets, and social networks alongside mosques, education, and da'wah.

Beyond Labour: Migrants as Active Constituents of Religious Reproduction

The most important analytical finding concerns the tendency of conventional migration categories to define economic migrants predominantly according to their reason for migration. From this perspective, a migrant who enters Sabah in search of employment is categorised primarily as a worker. Such categorisation is useful for analysing labour markets, migration policies, and economic outcomes, but it captures only one dimension of migrant life.

Once migrants enter the destination society, they continue to possess religious, cultural, family, and social identities. Although employment may be the primary reason for migration, religious identity continues to shape migrants' experiences and their relationships with communities in destination areas. Their religious identity accompanies their economic mobility, although the degree and form of religious participation naturally differ between individuals and communities.

Historical studies of Islamic development in Sabah show that the growth of Muslim communities has been accompanied by the development of mosques, surau, Islamic education, and other forms of communal organisation (Mat Zain & Omar, 2003; Yusin, 1990). The presence of Muslim migrants forms part of the social constituency within which these institutions operate. This does not establish that economic migrants individually founded or financed particular institutions unless documentary evidence directly demonstrates such a relationship. Rather, the contribution is more appropriately understood at the community level: sustained Muslim population mobility enlarges and diversifies the Muslim social environment.

This interpretation is consistent with the distinction between direct and indirect contribution established in the methodology. The strongest documentary evidence concerning economic migrants relates to indirect contributions. Their primary purpose for entering Sabah is generally employment, income generation, or trade. Yet their presence simultaneously contributes to Muslim demographic continuity, social interaction, and the maintenance of a religious community in the destination society. Economic migration therefore differs from da'wah migration: in da'wah migration, religious propagation forms an explicit reason for movement, whereas in economic migration religious effects are generally secondary consequences of mobility.

Economic Migration as a Multidimensional Process

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that economic migration in Sabah should not be interpreted solely through labour demand, remittances, documentation, and economic productivity. These dimensions remain central and are strongly represented in existing migration scholarship. However, migration also involves the movement of people who carry religious identities, social practices, family ties, and community networks with them.

For Muslim economic migrants, mobility can simultaneously have economic and religious consequences. Historically, commercial mobility facilitated encounters between Sabah and Muslim trading societies. In the modern period, labour migration from neighbouring Muslim populations has contributed to the growth and continuity of Muslim populations and social networks in Sabah, while migrant participation in the economy contributes to the economic resources, social networks, and community structures that help sustain Muslim communal life.

The findings therefore do not suggest a simple causal chain in which economic migration automatically produces Islamic development. Instead, the relationship is cumulative and operates in conjunction with local conversion, natural population growth, Muslim community agency, religious institutions, da'wah activities, and historical connections with the wider Muslim societies of maritime Southeast Asia.

This interpretation addresses the gap identified earlier. Much of the scholarship on migration in Sabah understandably focuses on employment, irregular migration, recruitment, remittances, security, and socioeconomic consequences (Wan Hassan et al., 2008; Wan Hassan et al., 2010; Mulia et al., 2015; Sayed Mahadi et al., 2017). The present analysis adds another dimension: economic migrants can also become part of the religious development of destination societies even when religious propagation is not the primary motivation

for migration. In the Sabah context, their contribution is therefore best understood not as a replacement for local Muslim agency but as one component within a wider historical process.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Muslim economic migration contributes to Islamic development in Sabah primarily through indirect, cumulative, and community-level processes. The analysis shows that economic migration should not be understood solely as a labour-market phenomenon. Although employment, income generation, and trade remain the primary motivations for this form of mobility, the migration of Muslims also generates broader social and religious effects within destination communities.

The findings demonstrate that these contributions operate mainly through indirect and cumulative processes. Historically, commercial mobility created channels of contact between Sabah and Muslim trading communities from neighbouring regions and the wider Muslim world. In the modern period, sustained labour migration from Muslim-majority and Muslim-populated neighbouring areas has contributed to the growth and continuity of Muslim populations and social networks in Sabah. Muslim economic migrants have also become part of the socioeconomic structures and social networks that help sustain Muslim communal life.

However, economic migration should not be treated as the sole or dominant explanation for Islamic development in Sabah. As discussed earlier, the growth of Islam in the state has also been shaped by local conversion, natural population growth, da‘wah activities, religious institutions, internal mobility, and historical interaction with surrounding Muslim societies. Their contribution should therefore be understood as one element within a wider historical and social process of Islamic development.

The study extends migration scholarship in Sabah by showing that economic migration may also have religious consequences, even when religion is not the primary motivation for migration. Existing discussions have largely concentrated on labour demand, economic development, irregular migration, remittances, social consequences, and security. By examining the religious dimension of economic migration, this study demonstrates that migrants may influence destination societies in ways that extend beyond their formal economic roles.

At the same time, the study is limited by its reliance on documentary sources and qualitative content analysis. It does not measure the extent of individual migrant participation in religious institutions or establish direct causal relationships between migration and particular forms of Islamic development. Future research may therefore examine specific migrant communities, localities, or religious institutions using empirical field data and comparative approaches.

Overall, the Sabah experience suggests that economic migration is a multidimensional process. Muslim migrants move in search of livelihood, but their presence also becomes embedded within demographic, social, economic, and religious structures. Recognising this broader relationship provides a more comprehensive understanding of both migration and Islamic development in Sabah.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All materials analysed in this study were obtained from published academic literature, historical records, official statistics, government publications, and other documentary sources cited in the article. No new primary dataset was generated.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on documentary sources and did not involve human participants or animal subjects.

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Correction Point by Point

No.	Reviewer Comment	Author's Response	Location in Manuscript
1.	The central concept of Islamic development remains insufficiently	The manuscript explicitly specifies that the "Islamic development" refers to the expansion, growth and communal reproduction of Islam (*perkembangan Islam*) rather than physical or formal institutional development (*pembangunan Islam*). Specifically, this study focuses on four key contributions of Muslim economic migration to Islamic development in Sabah, namely through historical, demographic, social and religious dimensions.	Methodology section (paragraph 1, page 3)
2.	The analysis often moves from economic participation or demographic presence to religious contribution without traceable migrant-specific evidence.	We have clarified that the religious impact of economic migration does not necessarily occur through direct proselytization (da'wah), but can also form indirectly through social networks, the continuity of Islamic practices, and daily interactions within the local community. The presence of Muslim migrants who bring along their religious identity,	- Introduction section (paragraph 4, page 2) - Result and discussion section (first paragraph, page 3-4) - Subsection 'Historical

		culture, and Islamic practices serves as a channel that indirectly contributes to the development of religious life among the Muslim population in Sabah, even though their migration was originally driven by economic imperatives.	Continuity: Maritime Trade as an Early Conduit of Islamization' (paragraph 3, page 4)
3.	Corpus selection, coding and source appraisal are insufficiently reported. Several document types claimed in the methodology are not identifiable in the bibliography.	Revisions have been executed by re-screening and refining the reference materials.	- Abstract (page 1) - Methodology sections (paragraph 2, page 3)
4.	Historical trade and contemporary labour migration are combined without adequate analytical boundaries.	We aim to demonstrate that both eras share a similar 'indirect' mechanism (namely, economic motives yielding indirect religions outcomes). The era of historical trade is positioned as a contextual background that holds a conceptual parallel.	Subsection 'Historical Continuity: Maritime Trade as an Early Conduit of Islamization' (page 4)
5.	Novelty relative to cited migration and religion studies needs clarification.	We emphasize that the primary value of this study resides in its substantive contribution to the scholarly literature. The manuscript's explicit theoretical novelty has been further articulated in the introduction. While existing migration scholarship on Sabah has largely centered on socio-economic and policy dimensions namely migrant labor dynamics, irregular migration, recruitment mechanisms, remittances, border management, and the economic dependence of particular sectors on foreign workers.	Introduction section (paragraph 5, page 2)