

Spice Route and Islamization on the West Coast of Sumatra in 17th-18th Century

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Abstract— In the XVII century AD, the West Coast of Sumatra was a very busy trade route visited by foreign merchants. In this region, spices were the main attraction of traders to come to trade transactions, so that the West Coast of Sumatra became a conquest of every country to hegemonize this region. In addition to trade flows, the region was also the path of the process of Islamization on the West Coast of Sumatra. It is very hard to deny that the Islamization process was driven by traders from Arab, Gujarati and China. This merchant not only carried trade commodities but also brought the ideology to propagate to inter-island traders as well as local traders. The Islamization process on the West Coast of Sumatra followed the spice route that have become a trader as good as the spreaders of Islam.

Keywords— *spice route; Islamization; west coast of Sumatra*

I. INTRODUCTION

The west coast of Sumatra's spice path began from the port of Barus. As an inter-island port center even between countries, Barus was a very busy route visited by traders. among foreign traders, Barus was the most popular port, this happened because Barus was the largest producer of camphor (incense) in the world [1]. Yamin said even the involvement of Barus (Lobu Tua) in international trade began as early as 6,000 years ago [2]. The existence of an early trade shipping relationship between India and the western coast of Sumatra (Barus) was evidenced with the presence of a Tamil-language inscription since 1088 AD written by a Tamil merchant association in Barus. It was explained that in 1088 AD there had been close relations between Sumatra and India [3]. In another review, it was described how the Barus Lime commodity was widely known among Arab and Indian traders and even this product was also traded to Europe. This camphor was a fragrance and medicine used by Arabs and Indians. In addition, Chinese ceramics were also found in Barus indicating there was a trade relationship between China and Barus on the west coast of Sumatra [4].

The port of Barus commerce weakened in the 15th century AD when the center of the new spice route appeared in the

Malacca Strait, Malacca. Malacca developed into the largest spice trade center in the western region of the archipelago. Malacca's Hegemony and glory at least lasted for about a century.

Tome Pires in his book, *Suma Oriental* described the city of Malacca as the center of Southeast Asian commerce. None of the commercial dealers are as large as Malacca. merchandise from the entire Eastern world is sold here. When the monsoon season ends, you can get whatever items you need and sometimes exceed what you are looking for [5]. With the transfer of the trade center to the Malacca Strait, the trade on the west coast of Sumatra began to slow down, and its route began to move to the East Coast of Sumatra. The east coast region was not an area far to the interior of the central part of the island of Sumatra, especially Minangkabau as described by Gusti Asnan. He said that this east coast region, especially the middle east coast, as their overseas region was known as the downstream *rantau*. It was unclear when this overseas region developed later compared to coastal shores in the west coast region

One of the strengths of Malacca as a commercial city was its strategic location. It was surrounded by large islands with abundant and potential natural resources. The large island of Sumatra, divided into several important kingdoms, such as Aceh, Palembang, Minangkabau. In the southern part of Malacca, stretched the island of Java, Bali, Nusa Tenggara, Sulawesi and Maluku, which gave Malacca very profitable spices in large quantities. In the Malacca commercial city, met archipelago traders with foreign traders such as China, Arabia, Indian Muslim traders from Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Benggali who came by their own ship [6].

However, the arrival of the Portuguese to the archipelago was an early sign of the collapse of Malacca's power over the trading ports as a supplier of spices. In 1511 AD, the Portuguese conquered the kingdom of Malacca which had been its main target. The important reason why Malacca was the main target was that it was one of the three main ports as a supplier and

access to open the way to control the archipelago spice trade in the Indian Ocean. In addition to the spice factor, the arrival of the Portuguese to the archipelago was also due to the spirit to destroy Islam. So, Muslim merchants began to avoid traveling to Malacca and enlivening the trade of the West Coast of Sumatra.

The collapse of Malacca was a breath of fresh air for the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam to further develop its position as a trading network. Geographically, Aceh was the northernmost island of Sumatra, its position was very strategic in trade and shipping routes because it acted as a transit port connecting the Bengal Bay trade zone with the western region of Sumatra [7].

Within a period of 120 years, Aceh developed into a strong kingdom in the political and economic fields. The sultan Ala'addin Riayat Shah al-Kahar (1537-1571) was considered a figure who played a large role in growing Aceh into an influential political and economic force in the western region of Indonesia [8]. He controlled almost all eastern regions of Sumatra Island to Asahan, Panai, and all areas on the west coast of Sumatra [9]. Trading and shipping activities took place vigorously that there were many merchants from Europe, India, Mongol, Bengal, Siamese, China, Java, Malay, Armenia, Malabar, and Mooren from the Coromandel coast. They traded various products, from forest products to stone gem and gold that had been refined to have high value.

II. METHOD

This study employed a historical method carrying out four steps. The first was heuristics where the researcher collected resources in the form of archives and other documents obtained from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (NARI) [10], the Rusli Amran Foundation Library stored in Gusti Asnan's home, the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, and the Ignatius library in Yogyakarta. The letters and news were also collected from the *Bronnenpublikatie* series Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-General en Raden and Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, totaling 16 volumes. There were also VOC documents stored in NARI, which were listed in the inventory book, and the Archives of the Dutch East India Company and Local Institutions in Batavia. Letters were sent regularly from the local authorities intensively in 1700 AD. In that year the local rulers in West Sumatra, especially the Inderapura Kingdom, almost every year sent a report to Batavia about the development of commerce in the Inderapura Kingdom ((ed), 2010). Another archive that also strengthened Inderapura was Contract Gesloten Realm met de Regent van Indrapoera, Verbond Indrapoera, Contract Indrapoera. This archive explained a lot about the existence of the Inderapura Kingdom and its relationship to the trade on the west coast of Sumatra.

The second was source criticism where the researcher verified the sources in the form of archives written by the VOC and sources written by the local community. Both sources are verified to examine their accuracy. Source criticism was carried out by means of internal criticism (credibility) and external criticism (determining the authenticity of the source). The third

was interpretation intended to interpret historical sources that had been verified. These sources were interpreted to obtain an explanation of historical facts that implicitly discussed one event and synthesized the facts obtained through historical explanations. The interpretation was done by analyzing verified sources through situational analysis. It consisted of two levels that covered examining the process of awareness of the perpetrators concerning the interpretation of situations that were thought to cause actions, and examining biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors that gave rise to interpretations and actions that accompany them. In relation to the context of trade, the data were analyzed by identifying sources about the arrival of Islam brought by traders, then data about the acceptance of Islam by local merchants, and the data about the role of the sultanate and traders in Islamizing the local population. The data that had been interpreted became the historical facts created by historical researchers themselves. The fourth was historiography as the last stage in historical writing aimed to recreate the totality of past events that actually happened. The historiography was carried out to compile a series of facts that had been synthesized in the form of analytical critical historical writing. Through this stage, the authors hoped to present a good and scientific historical writing so that it had the expected value

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the XVII-XVIII century AD, the West Coast of Sumatra became a busy route visited by traders from overseas. The arrival of traders from various regions into became one pattern of trade routes as well as a path of Islamization on the west coast of Sumatra. First, the Bengali sea routes centered on the Coromandel coast that according to many historians was dominated by Muslim traders from Arabia and India [11]. Marisson [12] and Arnold supported each other long before the 17th century AD Coromandel and Malabar had been used as a place of religious transformation in the archipelago and even in Southeast Asia. According to Marisson the Coromandel coast became the center of the spread of Islam spearheaded by traders because of the school similarity, Koromandel the Shafi'i school. This school was brought by traders from the Coromandel to the West Coast of Sumatra as a religious institution model that was still maintained by the West Coast of Sumatra community.

Arnold emphasized that the Coromandel was only used as a place of stopover by traders to get to the archipelago, where Muslim traders from Arab, Persia, and India gathered to continue their journey to other places. Of course, the easiest area to visit was the west coast of Sumatra. According to Dobbin's analysis, the route of the West Coast of Sumatra at the north end protruded to the Coromandel Indian coast and Middle East trade routes. Second, the Malacca route brought together two trade flows which have a very busy trading intensity, namely trading on the east and west coast of Sumatra. Before being ruled by Portuguese, Malacca was very crowded with Muslim traders from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Abyssinia, Ormus, Persia, Rum and Turkey. In Malacca, there was a more dialogical and cosmopolitan scientific transmission, because all traders who came from various regions had a different

experience and Islamic history. Ricklefs further explained the atmosphere of trading in Malacca;

"In Malacca, Indonesia's trade network was connected with routes that reached the western region of India, Persia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, West Africa and the Mediterranean region, the northern regions of Siam, Pegu, and the eastern region to China and possibly to Japan. This was the biggest trading system of the time and two important exchanges were Gujarat in the north west of India and Malacca [13].

The Portuguese conquest of Malacca was considered by some historians not to be merely a pragmatic economic factor, but rather due to ideological factors. Coincidentally at that time in Europe, there was an expulsion and cleansing of Muslims in Spain. Seeing the conditions that did not profit ideologically, Muslim traders began to be reluctant to visit the port of Malacca and they began to divert trade through the west coast of Sumatra. At the same time, Aceh Darussalam grew into a large kingdom and took over the function of Malacca in the context of accommodating Muslim traders who began to be removed in the Malacca Strait by the Portuguese. Third, the Chinese trade network could not be traced except in the 15th century AD, with the discovery of many ceramic fragments in the Old Lobu area. The ceramics were not brought directly by the Chinese but were bought by local Lobu Tua traders in Malacca. Groeneveldt and Guillot believed that before the 17th century AD, there was no literature revealing the existence of Chinese traders on the west coast of Sumatra. Xi Yang Kao, a note from China, illustrated that Muhammad was born on the west coast of Sumatra, as well as describing Barus. This Chinese merchant wrote that Barus was on the east coast of Sumatra. In these two cases, the interaction of Chinese traders with the west coast of Sumatra had not been established. Only in the 17th to 18th century, there was some literature which revealed the existence of Chinese traders on the western coast of Sumatra. Kroeskamp explained that in the 17th century AD, there was already a Muslim community in Barus, they had a role in enlivening trade in this pathway. It was assumed that the Muslim community was a western Chinese commercial network where they carried commodities, namely ceramics [14]. Another literature describing the existence of Chinese traders in Inderapura was from the diary of the castle of Batavia, 1 March 1701. This note had been analyzed by Perret, with the title "Examination of a Chinese Trader concerning Batak People in North Sumatra, March 1, 1701". Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta briefly the archive contained:

"Ten years ago he had boarded a ship that was piloted by a Chinese named Khintsijko, and sailed to Malacca and Pande which was located around Dilly. There, the captain of the ship sold his merchandise to the Malays, and then he continued sailing to Pande with his ship's crew. There he bought salt, bowls of copper, and the blue cloth he carried, and from there with some porters, he went by road to the Batak region which was about 10 to 11 hours from Baros. There he exchanged or traded his items and got incense and wax material, and then he returned to Pande and sold the

items and got salt. He also told that for ten years he traded and made a living by going back and forth from and to these two places. In the meantime, among the locals, he became increasingly known, and after five years he married according to local customs with a Bata woman who had been given by her parents to him in return for 50 ringgit and had a daughter who was now four years old."

The report also explained that in the 18th century AD, Chinese traders were accustomed to commuting back and forth on the west coast of Sumatra to trade with a number of existing port traders, especially Inderapura. From that note it was also identified that traders who came to Inderapura were sword-traders. It was very difficult to say that this western Chinese merchant route helped the wider Islamization process, because the traders who came to the west coast of Sumatra were Muslims who were able to carry out religious rituals, so that transmission between local Muslim traders and Chinese Muslim traders continuously happened through a network of commercial economics

IV. CONCLUSION

The western coast of Sumatra in the 17th-18th century AD had become a spice route, where the main trading commodity was pepper. The traders came and used this route to find spices alongside the west coast of Sumatra. This spice route was also used by Muslim traders to spread Islam. The path included Komandel spice routes, Malacca spice paths, and Chinese spice pathways

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