



Incense and Islam in Indonesian context: An ethnobotanical study

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Review

Abstract

Background: Incenses, harvested from plant in the form of resin, have been used in various religious practices for centuries, in which the resins are burned to produce fragrant fumes. The study aims to understand the arrival and development of Islam in Indonesia, which is apparently brought by the Muslim traders with good understanding of Sufism. In order to achieve the high level of enlightenment, the Sufis need medium in the form of incense.

Methods: Ethnohistorical approach was used in this study by combining historical events from an anthropological perspective with data collected in the form of literature review and supporting documents.

Results: The study revealed that the Arabs have interacted with incense from Indonesia since the pre Islamic time mainly the so called Indonesian incenses, such as Sumatran incense or *kemenyan* (*Styrax benzoin* Dryand., and *Styrax sumatranus* J.J.Sm.), Sumatran camphor (*Dryobalanops aromatica* C.F.Gaertn.), agarwood (*Aquilaria malaccensis* Lam.), and sandalwood (*Santalum album* L.).

Conclusions: The traders from Indonesia came to the Southern Arabia (particularly Hadhramaut in Yemen) to trade the valuable spices. When Islam came to Southern Arabia, the people of Indonesia might learn Islam there and brought back to Indonesia prior to the coming of the Muslim teachers from Arabia. Indonesia, i.e., Sundaland, has been recognized as the area that produces the best known incenses since the Late Pleistocene. Incense has been an integral part of the Austronesian (including Indonesian) civilization and societies; thus both cannot be separated.

Keywords: Ethnobotany; Incense; Indonesia; Islam

Background

As a commodity that grows in the Indonesian archipelago, incense is not only seen as a biological variety, but gives birth to grand narratives about the traces of Islam in the archipelago. This narrative describes the beginning of the trade period that connects the archipelago with other regions of the world, and the acculturation of Islam with religions and beliefs that have been present before in the archipelago (*Nusantara*).

Burning incense is a common practice among humans since ancient times (Burrige 2020). Incense was burned to help them contemplate and draw closer to God. Religious believers commonly use incense in their rituals (Bursi 2020; Ren *et al.* 2022; Stern 2023; Vainstub 2023). Burning incense has been practiced by Egyptians since before Christ (Fulcher & Budka, 2020; Huang 2022), Chinese (Ren *et al.* 2022), Africans (Sadgrove 2020), Europeans (Burrige 2020), Greeks and Romans (Verbanck-Piérard 2017), Arabs and Muslims (Bursi 2020).

In relation with that, the custom of burning incense, which have been practicing by the people of Indonesia for thousands of years met with the religious thought brought by the Sufis to Indonesia (Laffan 2011; Ridhwan 2017; Setiadi 2021; Zuhri *et al.* 2021), especially from various places in Yemen, in which throughout history, Yemen is indeed the important port for spices from Indonesia to the Middle East and in return following the same route, Islam was spread from the Middle East to Indonesia (Woodward 2011; Le Maguer-Gillon 2015).

Through *Styrax benzoin* and *S. sumatranus* as the main sources of incense, other species of plants are also harvested for incense, such as *damar mata kucing* (*Shorea javanica* Koord. & Valetton), *galadupa* or also known as Sulawesi incense (*Sindora galedupa* Prain), Sumatran camphor (*Dryobalanops aromatica* C.F.Gaertn.), Indonesian cinnamon (*Cinnamomum burmanni* (Nees & T.Nees) Blume), and *rasamala* or Javanese liquidambar (*Liquidambar excelsa* (Noronha) Oken). The Sufis could directly interact with the local people in various places in Indonesia. The result of such continuous interactions is called acculturation. From this point of view, incense can be regarded as one of the entrances for Islam to enter Indonesia following the spice and other plant-based commodities trades such as clove (*Syzygium aromaticum* (L.) Merr. & L.M.Perry), nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans* Houtt.), candlenut (*Aleurites moluccanus* (L.) Willd.), gambier (*Uncaria gambir* (W.Hunter) Roxb.), sandalwood (*Santalum album* L.), coconut (*Cocos nucifera* L.), and rice (*Oryza sativa* L.).

The Sufis and the Muslim traders that brought Islam to Indonesia in the early days noticed that the custom of burning incense had already been practiced by monotheistic religions prior to Islam that phylogenetically have strong relation to Islam like Judaism and Christianity where the burning incense is the important part on the religious practice in relation with creating the sacred atmosphere.

The discussion here is regarded interesting because the previous studies focused more to the role of the Sufis in the processes of spreading Islam in Indonesia (Johns 1995; Kahane 1980; Ricklefs 2006). When introducing Islam to the people of Indonesia, the Sufis adapted the teachings to the local traditions in Indonesia and resulting in syncretism (Florida 1993; Laffan 2011; Ridhwan 2017), cultural acculturation (Hefner 1985; Woodward 2011), traditional dynamics, and mysticism (Ricklefs 2006, 2007).

During the process of introducing Islam to the dynamic people of Indonesia, the emissaries of Islam did not eradicate the old pre-Islamic traditions; instead, they enriched and added with the Islamic nuance (Woodward 2011; Howell 2001; Ricklefs 2006). Even in the post Islamic Arabian Peninsula, the tradition of burning incense in relation with air freshener is still allowed, even by Prophet Muhammad himself (Aziz 2011). It is proven by the discovery of numerous incense burners in Arabian Peninsula from the time when Islam has been established as the dominant religion (Le Maguer-Gillon 2011).

The traces of Islamic adaptation and the traditions resulted from it can be observed in many places in Indonesia, such as in various places in Aceh (Johns 1995), Java (Ricklefs 2006, 2007), the Majapahit Javanese in Tengger Mountains, East Java (Hefner 1985), Sulawesi (Pelras 1993), West Sumatra (Aziz *et al.* 2020), and many other places. Even the use of incense in conspicuous Muslim societies in Ambon, the Moluccas (including the Ambonese, Bugisnese, Javanese, Makassarese, Malays, even the Sasak) was noticeably as it is observed by Rumphius in the 18th century.

The acculturation of Islam and local traditions is possible because the emissaries of Islam accommodated the Sufis, who were adaptable to the local customs and traditions (Howell 2001). The Sufis did not eliminate the traditions that were developed in the communities, but they even added and enriched them with the elements of Islam (Woodward 2011; Howell 2001) where the tradition and their incense can cohabitant harmoniously with Islam.

Regarding the spread of Islam in Indonesia, apart from the messenger factor, it is also important to understand the basic character of Indonesian society as islanders who are generally open and not reluctant to accommodate foreign cultures (Ricklefs 2006). In other word, generally the Indonesians are open to new things brought by foreign visitors or by the returning fellow Indonesia people that brought new materials or ideas from abroad like in the cases of Hinduism and Buddhism (Miksic 2010). With such tolerant character, Islam is peacefully established and flourishes in the Indonesian society. Similar to Hinduism and Buddhism before it, Islam has also been naturalized and became a part of Indonesia.

In a number of Indonesian tradition, especially those included in the Austronesian civilization, such as the Balinese, Batakese, Bugisnese, Javanese, Madurese, Makassarese, and Sundanese, incense is an indispensable part of their life. The importance of incense can also be seen in the mixed Austronesian and Melanesian societies in the Moluccas, from Ambon to Seram Islands. It is believed here that the use of incense in the Melanesian societies is influenced by the Austronesians, in which both met and mixed in the Moluccas as the region where the two great civilizations of Indonesia are met (Klamer 2019).

The burning of incense is not just related with religious related purposes, but also mythical, cult, transcendental, and even economic purposes. Thus, the case of incense described in this study supports that even in the traditional societies the economical related purposes occur in non-physical or metaphysical forms. Material is an important component of the construction building of society, but rarely implemented in cultural analysis. Only the Marxist Anthropologists that regard the importance of material in analyzing a society. In other word, religions, traditions, and believes are all connected through the usage of materials. There is a rational consideration from types of materials used by a certain society for their cultural activities (Royyani 2021).

Based on the arguments described above, incense (in this sense traditionally used by the people of Indonesia for centuries or known as *kemenyan*) connect Islam with the traditions in Indonesia. The messenger of Islam employed incense based on the fact that fundamentally it does not contradict the religion of Islam. The current study describes the hypothesis that the arrival and development of Islam in Indonesia is apparently brought by the Muslim traders with good understanding of Sufism. It is assumed here that to achieve the high level of enlighten the Sufis also need a medium such as incense. This can be found in the customs of previous religions related to the cultural adaptation.

Materials and Methods

This study employed the desk study method, which entails gathering secondary data, analyzing, and interpreting them considering the topic (Creswell 2014; Johnston 2014). A desk study, also known as desk research, is a type of non-field research in which no surveys or direct observations are conducted in the field at specific research locations. In desk studies or desk research, secondary data are frequently used as the object of study (Johnston 2014). Data collection techniques relied on pre-existing data, both offline and online. Offline searches for sources (books, and sections of books) were conducted in a variety of libraries (Abu-Asab *et al.* 2011; Baldick 2013; Laffan 2011; Minter 2005; Ricklefs 2006; Royyani 2021), while online sources were obtained through scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Science Direct, and Springer Link. We also matched with Herbarium Bogoriense's vouchers for plant identification and verified their updated names using POWO (the Plants of the World Online). Literature topics for which sources were searched included biodiversity, Islamic history in the world in general and Indonesia in particular, and cultural acculturation.

Results and Discussion

Incense in the emergence of Islam to Indonesia

There are two opinions regarding the theory of the entry of Islam into Indonesia. First, Islam came and later flourished in Indonesia through the port of Gujarat in India about 13th century AD (Hameed 1982). This first opinion was rejected by some historians that believe Islam came to Indonesia directly from Hejaz route (Hejaz is an area in the Northwest of Arabian Peninsula, where the port of Jeddah and the holy city of Mecca are located), spread from there to Indonesia prior to 13th century and not only by the Arabs, but also by people from many nations, such as the Chinese and Persians, which in the end enriching the Islamic culture and traditions in Indonesia.

Apart from the difference in the chronology, the difference is also on the messengers who brought Islam to Indonesia; are they traders or Sufis? The arguments continue today regarding the subjects on the chronology, emissaries, and acculturation. There has been no serious study on the involvement of the cargoes brought to Indonesia by the Muslim traders from the Muslim world (especially the Middle East), especially related to biodiversity through trade in Indonesia. Moreover, Indonesia is widely known and connected with other nations in the world. Products of Indonesian biodiversity that were exchanged, such as spices and incense, were widely known since the 10th century AD and the most important port at that time was the Srivijaya Kingdom of Sumatra. The Persian explorer reported the wealth of Srivijaya Empire when he visited the Empire in 903 AD, especially the capital, Palembang. Ibn Rustah described that even then the Empire has already rich and Palembang has already been a cosmopolite port, where he found traders sold species of cockatoo (either White Cockatoo, *Cacatua alba* or Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo, *Cacatua galerita*). The bird has been trained to be able to speak fluently in Arab, Persian, Sanskrit, even Greek. Even in the 10th Century AD, Indonesia has already famous as a prosperous international trading area, where both materials and ideas (such as cultures and religions) were exchanged. Prior to the traders from the Middle East, Indonesia was already known by the traders from the Song dynasty China as the center for exotic spices and incense (Hogarth *et al.* 2006). The other place known by the Chinese then was Cambodia. Nevertheless, Sumatra is more widely known to them (Rustah 2003).



Figure 1. Incense trees on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia

The prominent incense from Sumatra is in the form of resin, mainly produced by three species: *Styrax benzoin* or Sumatran incense, *S. paralleloneurus* Perkins or feathered incense, and *S. sumatranus* or Toba incense (Figure 1). The Sumatran incense and Toba incense are the two species known to be harvested for their prime quality (Perkins 1907). The incense from Cambodia and other areas in Indochina is harvested from *S. tonkinensis* (Pierre) Craib ex Hartwich (Perkins 1907), in which the quality of the incense is lower than incense harvested from the legendary Sumatran species. Likewise, when concerning incense, Sumatra is the best origin place and has been known as the main trading area for incense world trade. Despite having their own species of *Styrax* that also known to produce incense, such as *S. chinensis* H.H.Hu & S.Ye Liang (Perkins 1907); however, the quality is much lower than incense harvested from the Sumatran species, especially for the aroma. Thus, it is not surprising to know the fact that the Chinese have been searching and trading the better quality of incense in Southeast Asia, including *Nusantara* (the Indonesian Archipelago). This was reported by numerous Chinese writers, explorers, and traders even since the Song and Tang dynasties. The incense are processed for medicinal, ceremonial, food, and even smoking-related purposes or known as “the sauce” (Minter 2005).

The wide range of incense trade has already been established approximately around 6th Century AD and this supports the theory that the religious traditions involving the burning of incense is very ancient and have been found in many civilizations, including in the Middle East, particularly in the pre Islamic Arab before 6th Century AD, where places in Southern Arabian Peninsula has been known for centuries as the center for spice trade from the eastern places, such as Indonesia and China.

As the people in the previous civilizations, such as the Babylonia, Assyria, Nabataean, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Israel, Ancient Ethiopian, Aryan-Sanskrit, Persia, Greek, and Romans up to Eastern Roman or the Byzantine, the Arabs were also burned incense in relation with their religious and domestic associations as the air-freshener (Hoyland 2001); a tradition that can still be found in the present day, both within the traditional Arabian territories and settlements outside the traditional boundaries of the Arabian territories, in which the communities are mostly composed by mixed Arabs or in Indonesia is known as *Arab Peranakan*. The burning of incense is not a part of Islamic tradition. In fact, it has been practiced by the Arabs long before the rise of Islam.

In Indonesia, where the best incense produced species are found, the tradition of burning the incense is indigenous and has been the major component in the Austronesian (particularly the West-Central Austronesian) civilization and it is still practiced up to this present day by the traditional and even Muslim communities throughout the country.

Incense is used in the spiritually related ritual such as healing, opening of the planting season, and various other rituals. One example is found in the Muslim Malay community from Tasik Betung Village in the Siak Regency, Province of Riau in middle of Sumatra. In the community, there is a traditional healer known locally as *bomo*. A *bomo* will start the healing ritual with burning the incense, in which the incense is usually placed in a special bowl made from the coconut shell. Incense is also directly consumed as can be found in the communities live in Buru Island, the Moluccas. Incense that is consumed directly, especially by pregnant women, is believed to make the fetus grow healthier and smarter, as said by a spiritual figure on the island known as *Papa Raja*.

Unlike the incense from Indonesia, Arabian incense is harvested from various species of the genus *Boswellia*, especially *B. carteri* Birdw., *B. frereana* Birdw., *B. sacra* Flück., *B. serrata* Roxb., and *B. papyrifera* (Caill.) Hochst., which have been known as incense in Arabic civilization (particularly *B. sacra* and *B. frereana*), which are naturally grow in the Arabian Peninsula, especially Oman and Yemen and also northern coast of Africa, particularly Somalia.

The genus *Boswellia* is unknown and does not naturally grow in Indonesia. The genus is distributed from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia and Somalia), southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (particularly Yemen) to western part of Indian Subcontinent, including Punjab in India and Pakistan. *Boswellia sacra* and *B. frereana* are commonly used in Arabic tradition related to

medicinal and religious purposes. The resin of the two species are known to be directly consume as medicine, in which the resin of *B. sacra* is more preferred than *B. frereana*, which have bitter taste (Al Harrasi *et al.* 2019). In Western countries, *B. frereana* is known as the Coptic Frankincense as it is the type of incense mainly used by the Egyptian Coptic churches in their religious rituals (Fulcher & Budka 2020; El-Badrawy 2023). About 80% of the *B. frereana* incense are exported from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea to Saudi Arabia, where customarily bought and brought home by Hajj pilgrimages to their countries and traditionally labeled as 'Arabian incense' (Bursi 2020). The remaining about 20% is exported by Saudi Arabia to various Muslim countries, including Indonesia. Thus, the incense known in Indonesia as Arabian incense is basically the resin of *B. frereana* and is always imported.

The association of Arabian incense with Islam indicates the fundamental phenomenon related to the existence of the diversity of Islam in Indonesia, in which most of the Indonesian Muslims apparently cannot distinguish between Islam and Arab, between the teaching of Islam and the Arabian traditions. As it was previously discussed, the tradition related to incense in lands of the Arabs is actually much older than the presence of Islam; therefore, rituals that involving incense is actually of Arabian cultures, not Islam.

From biodiversity to tradition diversity (i.e., ethnodiversity)

The tradition of burning incense is an integral part of the indigenous ethnodiversity of the Austronesians and has been practiced at least prior to the end of the 3rd Ice Age or before 11.000 BC especially in the areas, where the important species of plant producing resins occur (Baldick 2013). The tradition of burning incense is still existing and practiced in various places in Indonesia up to this very present day. The tradition of incense burning is usually proceeded prior to a ritual or in Javanese is known as *selametan* (Beatty 1999). The Javanese recognize 14 species of plants commonly used as incense, each with its own specific usage method (Teeuw *et al.* 1969; Roemantyo-Sangat 1990; Worsley *et al.* 2013).

Based on solid evidences, the *kemenyan* as a part of incense has already been traded in Southeast Asia for more than 1000 years as was recorded by Chinese explorers from the Song and Tang dynasties, in which China has been reported importing incense (in the form of *kemenyan*) from Sumatra and Cambodia for medicinal, ceremonial, gastronomical, and opium smoking purposes (Minter 2005; Hogarth *et al.* 2006). The international trade of incense as a part of the legendary Spice Route has been known earlier, which was around the 14th and 13th Centuries BC supported by the discovery of resin that is believed to be harvested from a species of *Styrax* (most likely from *S. benzoin* or *S. sumatranus*) in Mycenaean civilization brought there from Yemen in the southern part of Arabian Peninsula (Singer 2007). Then it was continued to the civilizations of Ancient Greek and Roman, so much that the Romans even had their own spice trade armada. There is no clear evidence whether the Roman spice armada did arrive and directly trade the spices to *Nusantara*. Nevertheless, there is a great possibility that the Romans did arrive in Sumatra. Further study is essential.

Table 1. Species of plants harvested for particular incenses commonly known in Indonesia as *kemenyan*

Species	Family	Vernacular Names in Indonesia and International Trade	Found
<i>Dryobalanops aromatica</i> C.F.Gaertn.	<i>Dipterocarpaceae</i>	<i>Kapur Barus</i> (Indonesian), <i>Barus camphor</i> , Sumatran camphor (English)	Malaysia (Malay Peninsula and Borneo, Sabah, and Sarawak), Brunei, Indonesia (Borneo, Kalimantan, and Sumatra)
<i>Liquidambar excelsa</i> (Noronha) Oken	<i>Altingiaceae</i>	<i>Rasamala</i> (Indonesian, Sundanese), sweet gum (English)	Bhutan, India (Assam, East Himalaya), China (South-Central), Tibet, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia (Malay Peninsula) and Indonesia (Sumatra, Java, and Lesser Sunda Islands)
<i>Shorea javanica</i> Koord. & Valetton	<i>Dipterocarpaceae</i>	<i>Dupa, dupa Jawa, kemenyan Jawa, damar mata kucing</i> (Indonesian), <i>pelalar</i> or <i>pelalar lengo</i> (Javanese), <i>damar puteh</i> (Acehnese), <i>damar sibosa</i> (Bataknese), <i>damar saga</i> (Minangnese), <i>damar kaca, damar mata kucing</i> (Lampungese), Javanese resin, cat eye resin (English)	Indonesia (Sumatra, especially West Sumatra and Java, especially Central Java)
<i>Sindora galedupa</i> Prain	<i>Fabaceae</i>	<i>Kemenyan Bugis, kemenyan Makassar, kemenyan</i>	Sulawesi, Lesser Sunda Islands, Moluccas

		<i>Sulawesi, dupa Bugis</i> (Indonesian), <i>galadupa, galedupa, mobingo</i> (Bugisnese, Makassarese), <i>kayu gowa, ai kowa</i> (Moluccans, especially Seram Island), Makassarese or Sulawesi balsam (English)	
<i>Styrax benzoin</i> Dryan	<i>Styracaceae</i>	<i>Kemenyan durame</i> (Indonesian), <i>haminjon</i> (Bataknese), Sumatran benzoin tree, gum benjamin tree (English)	Sumatra
<i>Styrax benzoin</i> var. <i>hiliferum</i> Steenis	<i>Styracaceae</i>	<i>Kemenyan bulu</i>	Sumatra
<i>Styrax paralleloneurus</i> Perkins	<i>Styracaceae</i>	<i>Kemenyan bulu</i> (Indonesian), <i>haminjon bulu</i> (Bataknese), Sumatran feathered benzoin tree, feathered gum benjamin tree (English)	Thailand, Malaysia (Malay Peninsula) and Sumatra
<i>Styrax sumatranus</i> J.J.Sm.	<i>Styracaceae</i>	<i>Kemenyan Toba</i> (Indonesian), <i>haminjon Toba</i> (Bataknese), Sumatran Toba benzoin tree, Toba gum benjamin tree (English)	Sumatra, particularly within the vicinity of Lake Toba, North Sumatra
<i>Vitex trifolia</i> L.	<i>Lamiaceae</i>	This species of incense is known by the Bugis-Makassarese Maros community as <i>leko lanrawani, lanrawani</i> or <i>lonra</i> , which means brave or not afraid on something. In some other areas in Indonesia the vernacular names sound similar such as <i>lagondi</i> (Sundanese in Western Java), <i>langgudi</i> (Minangnese of Western Sumatra), <i>legundi</i> (Javanese, Central and Eastern Java) <i>laghundi</i> (Madurese in Madura Island), and <i>gendaresi</i> (Palembangese, Southern Sumatra). In eastern parts of Indonesia, the plant is known by vernacular names such as <i>galumi</i> (Sumbawanese, Sumbawa Island), <i>sangari</i> (Bimanese, Sumbawa Island), and <i>ai tuban</i> (Ambonese in the Moluccas). In English the plant is known as simple-leaf chaste-tree. In mainland China the species is known as <i>Man Jing Zi</i>	<i>Vitex trifolia</i> is a wide spread species and naturally found along the coastlines from tropical East Africa to French Polynesia

Source: Perkins (1907), Soerianegara & Lemmens (1994), Kashio & Johnson (2001), Bedigian (2003), Pasaribu et al. (2013), Keim et al. (2020).

Up to this present day, the *kemenyan* is still cultivated by the people of North Sumatra (Table 1) through the integrated ecological friendly plantation system, in which the traditional *kemenyan Batak* or Batak's incense (*S. benzoin*) and Toba incense (*S. sumatranus*) (Perkins 1907; Garcia-Fernandes et al. 2003) are still cultivated. The plantations have been

established through generations as the consequence the social order and perception as the results of long interactions between the people and their incenses were also established (Widiyastuti *et al.* 1995). As incense has been traded in *Nusantara*, particularly Indonesia, apparently since the dawn of Austronesian civilization itself, it is understood that the Indonesians have their own social construction regarding their incense or *kemenyan*.

Human construction related to trees and the networking between those trees and surrounding things suggested that humans apparently build their conception based on the result of continuously interaction between them and the trees, which grow in their vicinity and well recognized (Jones & Cloke 2008). Thus, the Indonesians build their conception on incense based on their uninterruptedly relationship with the *kemenyan*. Thus, incense has been regarded as “life form” that can interact with the people. Hence, incense has been an integral part of Indonesians and has a unique ability to do something. The continuous relationship between the Indonesians and their spices can affect their perception, understanding, and knowledge on their incense to the level that spices have finally become something as essential as the people’s self-identification (Ingold 2012). In other words, the Indonesians are the “spice people” or simply spices are Indonesians.

Thus, it is acceptable that the Indonesians will do anything possible to find the alternative sources of materials for incense, when they are not available. Being the two great tribes of the Austronesian people, the Javanese and Sundanese recognize 14 species of plants that can be harvested for their incenses applied for the rituals (Teeuw *et al.* 1969; Roemantyo-Sangat 1990). Although incense generally is not regarded as archaeological artifacts; however, as incense continuously interacts with humans, it has been regarded as an important agent that able to affect people to do something (Ingold 2012). Based on the results of direct observations conducted in this current study indicate that in various places in Java and Bali, incense has been found as an important part of rituals conducted to start almost every activities in the daily life of the Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese (Sujarwo *et al.* 2019). When the incense is burnt, the people are quite and focus on the rest of the rituals (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Burning incense in religious rituals

The results of this present study also support to understand the dynamic relationships between incense and human civilizations. The best system is the non-linear, in which incense is no longer accepted as simply a useful plant product, but also as a phenomenon that interconnecting social, cultural, economic, political, and religious aspects in human civilizations.

As previously mentioned, the practice of burning incense is undoubtedly Austronesian and it is still being conducted today in numerous Austronesian tribes in Indonesia from Sumatra up to Sulawesi. The practice has never been observed in the Melanesian culture except in various tribes in the Moluccas, which can be assumed as: the influence of the Austronesian cultures following the series of their epical journeys to the East approximately 2000 years ago.

In certain areas in the Moluccas, where the influence of Islam is so apparent, the practice of incense burning can still be observed, such as in the islands of Ambon, Ternate, Tidore, Halmahera, Seram, and the adjacent smaller islands (i.e., the territories of the legendary *Siwa Lima* Confederation).

The results of this present study indicate that the incense burning tradition is commonly found in the areas, which anthropologically and linguistically Austronesians; thus, Sundaland. In the areas geologically included within Sahul-land, the tradition can only be found in the Moluccas. Undoubtedly the incense burning tradition is very much Austronesians, and Moluccas are the regions of contacts (melting pots) between the two great civilizations of *Nusantara*, Austronesia and Melanesia, in which regarding the incense burning tradition, the Melanesians had been influenced by the Austronesians.

The Indonesian usually burn incense for various purposes from their traditional ceremonies to the Islamic based tradition of reading the Quran, in which incenses are burned or they implement the substitutions in the form of perfumes with incense-like aroma (Woodward 2011). Incense aromatic perfumes are usually worn more by people in the large cities or urban societies for their religious-related activities, particularly among Muslims. As the consequence, the incense-based perfumes traders are commonly found around the mosques especially during the important Friday pray, where various aromas and quantities of perfumes are offered. Although incense-based perfumes are also used by the Christians, particularly the Catholics, in Indonesia it is exceedingly rare to find them traded within the vicinities of the churches. The producers and

traders of the incense-based perfumes are also abundantly found in Indonesian large cities; however, unfortunately, those perfumes now are largely based on artificial or chemical essences.

Incense as an agency has had strong theological and socio-political consequences in modern Indonesian history. Despite the fact that incense burning practice is allowed by the Islamic Law and even still being practiced by the post Islamic Arab societies all over the world. In Indonesia, the practice has been regarded as blasphemy (in the form of *musyrik* or believe other Lords than the Lord) or heresy (*bid'ah*) by some hardliner Muslims and Muslim organizations. This narrow views on incenses came to Indonesia in the same time with the arrival of the puritic religious sects at least around 19th century, which can be seen in the Padri movement in West Sumatra (Laffan 2011). This zealot-misleadingly orthodox view of Islam was started by efforts to purify Islam from practices, which they considered as impurities and the sources of the downfall of Islamic civilization particularly advocated by the 18th century Saudi's scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). In the 20th century, this puritan movement became the modernism movement (Jahroni 2015). The followers of this so called Islamic modernism movements believed that one of the declining factors was the fact that, according to them, the teaching Islam has been contaminated with various local believes, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Hellenism, Sufism, and even by various sects within Islam itself, which are not in accordance with their views. This was, according to them, the main reason that made the Muslim societies have become stagnant or *jumud* in Islamic terminology.

Regarding the usage of Indonesian or Sumatran incenses in religious activities and rituals, the followers of so called Islamic Modernism Movement gave bad stigmas to the people that still practicing the traditions as primitive Muslims or Muslims but still preserving primitivity. The first record of this stigma, especially to the Muslims was actually given by the Dutch Orientalists during colonial time, such as Snouck Hugronje, who mentioned that despite the majority of the people of Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) are Muslims, but they are still basically believe in their ancestors through burning the incense. The failure of the so called reformers (followers of Islamic modernism movement) is apparently due to their lack of understanding regarding the incense, particularly the Sumatran incenses and its place in Indonesian societies and civilization.

The long journey of the tradition of burning incense in the lives of Indonesian people shows the process of indigenization in the form of Islamic contextualization in local traditions. In the framework of responding to contemporary challenges, borrowing the pattern of relations between religion and local traditions, the tradition of burning incense can be placed in the framework of negotiation which is interpreted as an effort to dialectic Islam with various cultures in society. In negotiations as an effort for dialogue, there is a need to adapt existing traditions together (Imadudin & Nuralia 2023). More practically, negotiations need to be placed within the framework of what calls "demystification" of incense.

Many issues interest incense in the wider landscape. For example, the increasing trend of incense exports to the Middle East region, especially to Saudi Arabia, where the market share of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims is very large. Then, the domestic market of incense squirmed when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Another interesting issue is the struggle of incense farmers to continue to exist and survive in the midst of the presence of industrial companies destroying and disturbing incense as local wisdom. This study is expected to be followed up in further research that can answer the problems of advancing Indonesian society towards a cosmopolitan multiculturalism society.

Conclusion

Kemenyan or Sumatran incenses is deeply rooted in Austronesian civilization since the dawn of the civilization itself. This is well understood by the early messenger of Islam and implemented the indigenous incense-burning traditions in spreading Islam in Indonesia, such as done by the Nine Messengers (*Wali Sanga*) in Java. The use of incenses, including those that are harvested from the *kemenyan* or Sumatran incense, Sumatran camphor, agarwood, and sandalwood trees, is not prohibited in Islam even Prophet Muhammad himself allowed and used incense in relation with religious purposes. The Arabs have interacted with incense from Indonesia since the pre-Islamic time. The traders from Indonesia came to the Southern Arabia (particularly Hadhramaut in Yemen) to trade the valuable spices. When Islam came to Southern Arabia, the people of Indonesia might learn Islam there and brought back to Indonesia prior to the coming of the Muslim teachers from Arabia. Indonesia, i.e., Sundaland, has been recognized as the area that produces the best-known incenses since the Late Pleistocene. Incense has been an integral part of the Austronesian (including Indonesian) civilization and societies; thus both cannot be separated.

Declarations

List of abbreviations: Not applicable

Ethics approval and consent to participate: This research followed all ethical standards without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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