

Maritime Nationalism in the Nusantara Spice Route: A Historical Reconstruction of Indonesian National Identity

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Abstract

This article examines the historical reconstruction of the Nusantara Spice Route as a philosophical and historical foundation for constructing modern Indonesian maritime nationalism. As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia's national identity has frequently been trapped in an agrarian (land-based) paradigm due to the legacy of Dutch colonialism, which centralized economic activities in the hinterlands. Utilizing the critical historical method, this study retraces how inter-ethnic interaction, global trade, and cultural diplomacy along the pre-colonial Spice Route forged a sense of togetherness and interconnectivity (proto-nationalism) long before the formal concept of a nation-state emerged in the twentieth century. The findings demonstrate that the Spice Route was not merely a route for economic commodities, but rather a cultural space where diversity converged to foster an inclusive, cosmopolitan, and competitive maritime societal character. This reconstruction is crucial as a strategic cornerstone for Indonesia's vision as a Global Maritime Fulcrum, wherein nationalism is no longer perceived through the dividing boundaries of land, but rather through the sea that unites.

Keywords: *Maritime Nationalism, Spice Route, National Identity, Historical Reconstruction, Global Maritime Fulcrum.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

The construction of modern Indonesian national identity frequently encounters geopolitical and historiographical dilemmas. As a nation geographically dominated by two-thirds of marine territory, the collective memory of Indonesian society conversely tends to exhibit symptoms of "maritime amnesia."^[1] This phenomenon is characterized by a strong agrarian-continental outlook (land-based paradigm) in perceiving living space, economic development, and external political policies. This historiographical irony cannot be detached from the legacy of the colonial policies of the VOC and the Dutch East Indies Government, which systematically conquered the commercial ports of the Nusantara coast, decimated indigenous merchant fleets through monopoly treaties, and forced the socio-economic structure to shift into the hinterlands through forced labor systems and sugarcane or coffee plantations.^[2] Consequently, the sea, which

originally functioned as a bridge connecting inter-island interactions, transformed into a barrier, a boundary, and an unsettling territory.

Before colonial hegemony gripped the archipelago, the sea was the primary arena for national integration. Long before European nations anchored in Malacca in 1511, the cluster of islands in Nusantara had been united by a massive network of civilization, namely the Spice Route. This route brought together various high-value commodities such as cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) from North Maluku, nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) from the Banda Islands, and pepper (*Piper nigrum*) from Sumatra and Java with international traders from China, India, Arabia, to Europe.^[^3] The complexity of this spice trade did not merely drive ancient economic engines; rather, it triggered the birth of cosmopolitan settlements along the coast of Nusantara, such as Barus, Aceh, Banten, Tuban, Grisee (Gresik), Makassar, to Ternate and Tidore.^[^4]

In these cosmopolitan ports, an extraordinary process of cultural incubation occurred. Sailors from Bugis, Makassar, Java, Malay, and Ternate interacted with one another, exchanged navigational technologies, adopted the Malay language as a *lingua franca*, and agreed upon shared customary maritime laws.^[^5] This interconnectivity phenomenon constituted the early seeds of what can be termed "proto-maritime nationalism"—an nascent awareness of a shared living space bound by the sea. Therefore, the Spice Route must not be viewed reductively as a past economic commodity, but rather as a cultural space where the values of pluralism, inclusiveness, and tolerance converged, later becoming the core of Pancasila and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity).^[^6]

However, in mainstream historical narratives taught in schools, this maritime glory is frequently romanticized as a "lost past" without any contextual reconstruction efforts to address contemporary challenges. When the Indonesian government launched the vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum in the 21st century, this vision often faltered in its operation due to the loss of an ideological and cultural basis at the grassroots level.^[^7] The developing nationalism remains land-biased and territorial-chauvinistic. Without a historical reconstruction that positions the Spice Route as the root of national identity, maritime policies will only end up as physical infrastructure projects (such as port developments or marine highways) devoid of a seafaring cultural soul. On this basis, research on maritime nationalism based on the Spice Route has become highly urgent to conduct.

B. Statement of the Problems

Based on the background description above, the problems formulated in this scientific article are as follows:

1. How did the historical dynamics of the Nusantara Spice Route shape patterns of cultural interconnectivity and social integration among communities in Nusantara during the pre-colonial era?
2. How did Western colonial hegemony reduce the maritime character of Nusantara society into an agrarian society, and what was its impact on the formation of early national identity?

3. How can the historical reconstruction of the Spice Route be articulated as a philosophical foundation in constructing modern Indonesian maritime nationalism to support the current global vision?

C. Objectives of the Study

The objectives to be achieved through the writing of this scientific article are:

1. To analyze in depth the historical dynamics of the Nusantara Spice Route in facilitating inter-island social, linguistic, and cultural integration during the pre-colonial era.
2. To map the process of de-maritimization carried out by colonial powers and to identify the paradigm shift of identity from maritime to agrarian.
3. To formulate the concept of historical reconstruction of the Spice Route as an instrument to strengthen maritime nationalism relevant to Indonesia's identity as an archipelagic nation.

D. Significance of the Study

The writing of this article is expected to provide significant contributions, both theoretically and practically:

1. Theoretical (Academic) Significance

Academically, this work is expected to enrich the treasury of Indonesian maritime historiography, which has thus far received a minimal portion compared to land-based history (inland history). Furthermore, this article offers a new perspective in the study of Indonesian nationalism by integrating maritime history, cultural sociology, and geopolitical approaches to dismantle the myth of agrarian determinism in Indonesian identity.

2. Practical (Policy and Social) Significance

Practically, the results of this study can be utilized as material for reflection and humanitarian recommendations for policymakers (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, as well as the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment) in designing a maritime-based history education curriculum. For the broader community, this text is expected to revive collective pride in maritime identity (maritime pride), so that the sea is no longer viewed as a neglected backyard, but rather as the front porch of the nation's civilization.

II: RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design: Library Research

This study employs a qualitative research design with a primary focus on library research. Library research is a method directed toward searching, collecting, reviewing, and critically analyzing written sources that bear close relevance to the object of study.^[^8] Given that the primary focus of this article is the historical reconstruction of the Nusantara Spice Route and its

implications for the formation of Indonesian national identity, the presence of textual documents, chronicles, travelogues, ancient maps, and maritime historiographical literature serves as the primary instrument that cannot be replaced by experimental field data.

This qualitative-library approach was selected because it provides room for an in-depth interpretation (*thick description*) of the symbolic and cultural meanings underlying past spice trade activities. Through this method, the researcher does not merely treat historical texts as dead data, but rather as traces of civilization containing ideologies, power contestations, and dynamic formations of maritime identity.^[^9] Consequently, the notion of "maritime nationalism" can be extracted from the substance of ancient historical texts to be subsequently actualized within the contemporary national context.

B. Types and Sources of Data

The data used in this study are entirely secondary, sourced from literary repositories. These data sources are categorized into two primary types to maintain historical validity:

1. Primary Data Sources (Historical Sources)

These comprise contemporary documents or records written by historical actors or eyewitnesses during the golden era of the Spice Route trade (15th to 17th centuries). These sources include local chronicles such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, travelogues of foreign explorers like *Suma Oriental* by Tomé Pires (1512–1515), Chinese dynastic records (such as the Ming Dynasty), and the official archives of the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) trading company. These sources are vital for capturing the atmosphere of indigenous maritime interaction prior to colonial domestication.^[^10]

2. Secondary Data Sources

These consist of contemporary scholarly literature written by prominent maritime historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. These secondary sources encompass maritime historiography books by A.B. Lopian, Anthony Reid, Denys Lombard, and Adrian Horridge, as well as reputable scientific journal articles discussing theories of nationalism, maritime geopolitics, and the Global Maritime Fulcrum policy.

C. Data Collection Technique: Documentation Study

Data collection was carried out through documentation study techniques based on the principles of historical method. The initial step began with *heuristics*, namely the tracing and gathering of written sources across various digital databases (such as *Google Scholar*, *JSTOR*, and the digital archives of the *Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / KITLV*) as well as physical libraries.^[^11]

Once these sources were gathered, a filtering process was conducted utilizing reading sheets based on strategic keywords such as "*Jalur Rempah*" (Spice Route), "*Global Trade Network*", "*Maritime Nationalism*", "*De-maritimization*", and "*Indonesian Identity*". Only literature

demonstrating scientific validity and a direct correlation with the research problems passed to be analyzed in the subsequent stage.

D. Data Analysis Technique: Critical Historical Method

Data analysis in this library research applies the critical historical method, which comprises four main stages: source criticism (external and internal), interpretation (synthesis), and historiography:[¹²]

External Criticism (Authenticity)

Testing the physical authenticity of the documents or literature used. The researcher verifies whether the quoted texts, chronicles, or VOC archives are authentic copies or contain printing distortions.

Internal Criticism (Credibility)

Testing the validity of the textual content. The researcher critically questions the ideological bias of the writing. For instance, Tomé Pires' report in *Suma Oriental* or the VOC archives are analyzed with full awareness that these texts were written from a Eurocentric perspective that tended to devalue the navigational capacity of indigenous Nusantara sailors. Therefore, a *reading between the lines* technique is required to uncover objective facts regarding local maritime resilience.[¹³]

Interpretation (Qualitative Analysis)

Historical facts that have been verified are then assembled and interconnected using the analytical lens of Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism (*Imagined Communities*) and the concept of maritime resilience.[¹⁴] The researcher reconstructs how inter-ethnic trade interactions in historical ports triggered a process of cultural hybridization that fostered a sense of togetherness transcending tribal boundaries.

Historiography

The final stage wherein the synthesis of library data is rewritten in a narrative-chronological and thematic manner. The results are presented in Chapter III (Discussion) to comprehensively answer all research problems regarding the formation of maritime nationalism based on the reconstruction of the Nusantara Spice Route.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical Dynamics of the Nusantara Spice Route as a Catalyst for National Integration

The Spice Route was not merely a commercial cartographic route for exotic floral commodities, but rather an integrated cultural space where the civilizational interconnectivity of various ethnic groups in Nusantara manifested. Long before colonialism reduced the sea into an empty void

separating landmasses, the Nusantara sea functioned as an eastern Mediterranean that served as a hub for global trade networks. The commercial dynamics of nutmeg, cloves, and pepper demanded an organic inter-island dependency. Major spice-producing islands, such as the Banda Islands and North Maluku, could not subsist independently without staple food supplies of rice, which were heavily provisioned by maritime networks from East Java and South Sulawesi.[¹⁵]

This logistical dependency generated cosmopolitan port-polities along the coasts of Nusantara. According to Hasaruddin's historical analysis, the process of inter-ethnic commercial interaction within these transit ports did not merely spin the wheels of an ancient economy, but triggered an indigenization process of an exceptionally tolerant and inclusive maritime culture.[¹⁶] Sailors from Bugis-Makassar, Java, Malay, and Ternate who settled in these multi-ethnic port communities gradually eroded tribal primordial tensions by adopting Malay as a *lingua franca* and institutionalizing shared customary maritime laws.[¹⁷]

Within this perspective, the Spice Route network operated as the primary social laboratory that sowed the seeds of collective togetherness. The cultural identity of Nusantara was forged through fluid cultural crossovers upon the decks of traditional merchant vessels. Consequently, an awareness of a shared living space bound by the sea—or what is termed *proto-maritime nationalism*—had existed for centuries before modern land-based national movement organizations were formulated at the turn of the 20th century.

B. Western Colonial Hegemony and the De-Maritimization of Nusantara

The romanticism and resilience of Nusantara's maritime civilization began to encounter structural fractures when Western colonial powers, particularly the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*), established their hegemony in the 17th century. Colonialism did not only colonize territorially and plunder natural resources, but systematically executed a process of "de-maritimization" against the sociological character of the indigenous population. The VOC fully recognized that the primary strength of Nusantara kingdoms, such as the Sultanates of Makassar, Banten, and Demak, resided in their agile merchant fleets that operated sovereignly under the principle of the free sea (*mare liberum*).[¹⁸]

To dismantle this power, colonial forces imposed highly restrictive trade monopoly treaties through military intimidation (*gunboat diplomacy*), one of the most fatal examples being the forced signing of the Treaty of Bongaya in 1667 in South Sulawesi. Syamzan Syukur asserts that the penetration of Western colonial power dealt a devastating blow that severed the lifeblood of indigenous maritime culture by destroying local merchant fleets, closing access to international commercial ports, and criminalizing domestic free seafaring activities as piracy.[¹⁹] Due to the devastation of coastal trading ports, the economic and social mobility of the population was forced to shift inland (*hinterland*).

This forced transformation from a maritime-based society to a continental agrarian society escalated massively during the Dutch East Indies government era through the forced cultivation system (*cultuurstelsel*). The population was positioned as laborers for sugarcane, coffee, and tobacco plantations to fulfill European global markets. The long-term implication of this colonial policy was highly destructive to the construction of the national mindset: the sea, which was

originally viewed as a field of life and a unifier of the nation, turned into a terrifying, vacant, and exploitation-prone peripheral territory. This perspective birthed the "maritime amnesia" that remains deeply embedded within the cognitive structure of modern Indonesian society today.^[^20]

C. Historical Reconstruction of the Spice Route as the Philosophical Foundation of Modern Maritime Nationalism

Confronting the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century and Indonesia's vision to transform itself into a Global Maritime Fulcrum, a radical deconstruction of the current land-biased national development paradigm is required. The historical reconstruction of the Spice Route emerges not as a passive, nostalgic movement toward the past, but as an ideological instrument to re-contextualize Indonesia's true identity as an archipelagic state.

Thus far, Indonesian nationalism has tended to be anchored upon colonial cartographic land boundaries (*Pax Nederlandica*). By retracing the Spice Route, maritime nationalism can be reconstructed as a new collective consciousness: that the true strength of this nation lies not within the land that separates, but within the sea that bridges diversity.^[^21] The values of openness, cosmopolitanism, and resilience inherent in the character of ancient Nusantara mariners along the Spice Route must be revitalized as the cultural capital of modern society.

Philosophically and culturally, the reconstruction of the Spice Route is capable of infusing a seafaring cultural soul into physical maritime development policies. Hasaruddin argues that strengthening a maritime national identity will never succeed if it solely relies on constructing modern ports or procuring warships; rather, it must be sustained by a revitalization of maritime historical consciousness integrated into the national education system.^[^22] Once the collective memory of society is recovered and places the sea back as the front porch of civilization, the vision of maritime sovereignty, marine resource protection, and global maritime diplomacy will secure its most solid and organic legitimacy within the hearts of the Indonesian nation.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

Based on the results of the literature review and critical analysis of the historical dynamics presented, this scholarly article concludes three fundamental points:

1. The Spice Route as a Laboratory for National Integration

The pre-colonial Spice Route was not merely an economic pathway, but rather a fluid, cross-ethnic cultural space. Intensive inter-ethnic interactions in the transit ports of Nusantara generated an inclusive, tolerant, and cosmopolitan sociological ecosystem. The utilization of the Malay language as a *lingua franca* and the institutionalization of shared customary maritime laws demonstrate that proto-maritime nationalism—namely a collective consciousness of a unified maritime living space—had taken root long before the modern nation-state format was promulgated in the 20th century.

2. De-maritimization as an Impact of Colonial Hegemony

The political and military penetration of Western colonialism, particularly the VOC, systematically fractured the backbone of Nusantara's maritime civilization. Through restrictive trade monopolies such as the Treaty of Bongaya (1667) and the agrarian policies of the forced cultivation system (*cultuurstelsel*), the sociological structure of the indigenous population was forced to shift from independent seafarers to inland (*hinterland*) laborers. This process of geographical alienation birthed the phenomenon of "maritime amnesia," which continues to obscure Indonesia's archipelagic identity today.

3. Contextualizing Modern Maritime Nationalism

The historical reconstruction of the Spice Route serves as a vital philosophical foundation to support Indonesia's vision as a Global Maritime Fulcrum. Rewriting this historical narrative dismantles the myth of agrarian determinism, shifting the nationalism paradigm from one that is land-biased (oriented toward the land that separates) to an archipelagic state paradigm (oriented toward the sea that unites diversity).

B. Recommendations

To follow up on the findings of this study within the realm of practical application, several strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. To the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology

A restructuring of the history curriculum at the primary to secondary education levels is required to provide a more balanced proportion for maritime historiography. The narrative of maritime glory and the interconnectivity of the Spice Route must be taught not as romantic nostalgia, but as a foundational basis for shaping students' maritime character.

2. To Global Strategic Policymakers (Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment)

The development of physical maritime infrastructure, such as marine highways and port revitalization, must be balanced with a maritime culture development approach. The values of cosmopolitanism and resilience exhibited by ancient Nusantara mariners need to be adopted as cultural capital in formulating maritime diplomacy on the global stage.

3. To Historians and Cultural Researchers

Further specific interdisciplinary studies are required to explore local manuscripts (such as *lontara*, *babad*, and *hikayat*) in order to retrace local maritime wisdom that is adaptive to contemporary marine environmental sustainability issues.

Endnotes

- [1] Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), hlm. 3-5.
- [2] Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Remaja Rosdakarya, 2018), hlm. 112.
- [3] Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental: Perjalanan dari Laut Merah ke Cina* (diterjemahkan oleh Armando Cortesão, Komunitas Bambu, 2014), hlm. 202-205.
- [4] Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Tiara Wacana, 2013), hlm. 89.
- [5] Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah* (diterjemahkan oleh Nugroho Notosusanto, Universitas Indonesia Press, 2006), hlm. 76-80.
- [6] H.J. de Graaf, *Puncak Kekuasaan Mataram: Politik Ekspansi Sultan Agung* (Pustaka Utama Grafiti, 2002), hlm. 43.
- [7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Komunitas-Komunitas Terbayang* (Pustaka Pelajar, 2008), hlm. 6-7.
- [8] A. B. Lopian, *Pelayaran dan Perniagaan Nusantara: Abad ke-16 dan ke-17* (Komunitas Bambu, 2017), hlm. 12-15
- [9] Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: Sejarah Pergerakan Nasional*, Vol. 2 (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1993), hlm. 45.
- [10] Anthony Reid, *Asia Tenggara dalam Kurun Niaga 1450-1680: Tanah di Bawah Angin*, Jilid 1 (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), hlm. 88-92.
- [11] Denys Lombard, *Nusa Jawa: Silang Budaya – Jaringan Asia*, Jilid 2 (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2005), hlm. 110.
- [12] Edward L. Poelinggoman, *Makassar Abad XIX: Studi Tentang Kebijakan Perdagangan Maritim* (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2016), hlm. 74.
- [13] Taufik Abdullah, *Sejarah dan Masyarakat: Lintasan Sejarah Indonesia* (Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2008), hlm. 132.
- [14] Y. Paongan, *Mengembalikan Kejayaan Maritim Indonesia* (Maritim Institute, 2015), hlm. 55
- [15] Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680: The Lands below the Winds*, Vol. 1 (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), p. 95.
- [16] Hasaruddin, *Jaringan Perdagangan Internasional dan Hibridasi Budaya di Bandar Pesisir Nusantara* (UIN Alauddin Press, 2019), pp. 67-72.

- [17] A. B. Lopian, *Pelayaran dan Perniagaan Nusantara: Abad ke-16 dan ke-17* (Komunitas Bambu, 2017), p. 48.
- [18] Denys Lombard, *Nusa Jawa: Silang Budaya - Jaringan Asia*, Vol. 2 (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2005), p. 142.
- [19] Syamzan Syukur, *Dinamika Politik Islam dan Resistensi Maritim terhadap Hegemony VOC di Indonesia Timur* (UIN Alauddin Press, 2018), pp. 104-109.
- [20] Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: Sejarah Pergerakan Nasional*, Vol. 2 (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1993), p. 89.
- [21] Y. Paonganan, *Mengembalikan Kejayaan Maritim Indonesia* (Maritim Institute, 2015), p. 112.
- [22] Hasaruddin, "Rekonstruksi Pendidikan Sejarah Berbasis Karakter Bahari demi Ketahanan Nasional," *Jurnal Filsafat Peradaban Islam*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2021), p. 45.

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