

Fatahillah and the Foundations of Islamic Education in Banten: A Historiographical and Sufi Study of the 16th Century

Fatahillah dan Fondasi Pendidikan Islam di Banten: Kajian Historiografis dan Sufistik Abad ke-16

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah kontribusi Fatahillah dalam merintis pendidikan Islam awal di wilayah Banten melalui pendekatan historiografi kritis dan grounded theory. Selama ini, sosok Fatahillah lebih banyak dikenang sebagai panglima perang yang merebut Sunda Kelapa, sementara perannya dalam membangun institusi keilmuan dan spiritual masyarakat pesisir kurang mendapat perhatian dalam narasi sejarah arus utama. Berdasarkan studi literatur, wawancara lapangan, dan pengamatan situs sejarah, ditemukan bahwa Fatahillah membangun fondasi pendidikan berbasis pesantren, halaqah, dan nilai-nilai sufistik. Pendidikan yang ia dirikan tidak hanya bersifat transfer ilmu, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai sarana transformasi budaya, sosial, dan ideologis di tengah masyarakat pasca-Islamisasi. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa narasi kolonial telah mereduksi peran intelektual tokoh ini, sehingga perlu dilakukan reorientasi sejarah yang lebih adil dan kontekstual. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi penting dalam pemetaan akar pendidikan Islam Nusantara, khususnya di kawasan barat Pulau Jawa.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the contribution of Fatahillah in pioneering Islamic education in the Banten region through a critical historiography and grounded theory approach. Historically, Fatahillah has been primarily recognized as a military commander who captured Sunda Kelapa, while his role in establishing intellectual and spiritual institutions among coastal communities has been largely overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. Based on literature review, field interviews, and site observations, this research reveals that Fatahillah laid the foundation for Islamic education through pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), halaqah (study circles), and Sufi-based teachings. His educational efforts served not only as a means of transmitting knowledge but also as a transformative force for cultural, social, and ideological change in the post-Islamization society. This study further argues that colonial historiography has marginalized Fatahillah's intellectual legacy, highlighting the need for a more just and contextual reconstruction of historical narratives. The findings contribute significantly to the mapping of the roots of Islamic education in the Nusantara, particularly in the western part of Java.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Never abandon history," is the message bequeathed by Bung Karno, the founder of the Indonesian nation. History is not merely a record of the past, but rather a mirror for gazing into

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the future. In this context, understanding who our heroes were and how they shaped the nation's civilization is imperative. Fatahillah is a pivotal figure in Indonesian history whose significant role has not been fairly documented, particularly in the context of education and Islamization in Banten. (Fitriani, 2022; Maulana & Yunus, 2021)

Amidst shifting historical narratives still dominated by the architecture of colonialism, figures like Fatahillah are often positioned solely as military actors or local rulers. However, based on primary sources such as João de Barros's "Decadas da Asia" (Decadas da Asia) and various local chronicles, Fatahillah played a crucial role in Islamic propagation, the establishment of the education system, and the social transformation of coastal communities in the 16th century. Unfortunately, the historical reconstructions created during the colonial period have marginalized the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Fatahillah's work, even systematically obscuring his identity. (Damai & Kurnia, 2023; Rachman, 2020)

Indonesian historiography during the colonial period tended to subordinate local narratives to the broader framework of the colonizers' political interests. History was read from a European perspective and often written by those who had never witnessed local dynamics firsthand. Historians such as Peter Carey and Ahmad Mansyur Suryanegara strongly criticized this tendency. Carey argued that without love and appreciation for its own history, the Indonesian people would live in isolation, uprooted from their roots and identity. (Ramdani & Ali, 2021; Surya, 2020)

Fatahillah is depicted in many sources under various names: Maulana Fadhillah Khan al-Paseh, Ratu Bagus Pase, and Sunan Gunung Jati. His multiple identities reflect the spiritual practices of society at that time, especially in Sufi circles, where real names were often disguised to avoid showing off and showing off. Fatahillah was a man who undertook a long journey from Pasai to Mecca, then to Jepara, Cirebon, and finally to Banten, carrying out missions of da'wah, politics, and education. (Lubis, 2021; Aulia, 2023)

In the effort to Islamize Banten, Fatahillah served not only as a warlord who defeated the Portuguese, but also as a Sufi figure who established an Islamic education system that integrated tarekat (Islamic order), fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and morals. He established Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), majlis (study groups), and a community of ulama (Islamic scholars) that became the forerunners of Islamic civilization in western Java. (Sofyan, 2023; Aisyah, 2020)

However, it is important to recognize that the narrative about Fatahillah remains fragmented. This research aims to reconstruct this narrative through a critical historiography and archaeology approach to Indonesian Islam, as advocated by Prof. Dr. Muarif Ambary. This research also used a grounded theory approach to holistically compile historical data from various regions (Pasai, Demak, Cirebon, Banten). (Mufid, 2024; Harahap & Zahra, 2019)

To clarify Fatahillah's historical position and its relevance in early Islamic education in Banten, Table 1 presents the phases of his role in the development of Islamization and educational institutions:

Table 1. Historical Journey and Role of Fatahillah in the Islamization of Banten

Period	Location and Traces	Role	Contribution to Islamic Education
1511–1521	Pasai, Mekkah	Student scholars	Islamic studies, Sufism, and international networks
1522–1526	Jepara, Cirebon	Preacher & officer	Da'wah and the formation of a tarekat network

1527	Sunda Kelapa	Warlords	Unifying Islamic forces, establishing post-victory institutions
1527–1540	Banten	Dukes & clerics	Establishment of early Islamic boarding schools, teaching morals, tawhid, and fiqh
1540–1570	Cirebon & Pajang	Spiritual guide	Fostering a network of ulama, writing local Islamic texts

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative historical approach with critical historiography methods, combined with grounded theory strategies to construct alternative narratives from local and archaeological sources. The research was conducted to systematically and comprehensively reconstruct the traces of Islamic education pioneered by Fatahillah in Banten and the surrounding areas.

Critical Historiography Approach

Critical historiography methods were used to reanalyze colonial narratives that tended to diminish the intellectual and educational roles of Fatahillah. The researcher compared colonial sources such as the *Decadas da Asia* and *Suma Oriental* with local texts such as the *Babad Banten*, *Babad Cirebon*, and Islamic boarding school manuscripts from the 17th century. Source criticism was conducted in two stages: external criticism (origin, authenticity, and context of writing) and internal criticism (content, consistency, and bias of the sources). Damai, R., & Kurnia, T. (2023)

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted using multiple methods, including:

Literature Review

A review of more than 40 historical sources, including local texts (*babad*), colonial documents, and the latest academic research results (2019–2024). Aisyah, N. (2020).

Focused Interviews

Conducted with seven local informants in the Cirebon, Banten, and Demak regions, including caretakers of historical sites and caretakers of old Islamic boarding schools. The interviews aimed to explore local knowledge regarding the existence of early educational institutions associated with Fatahillah.

Field Observations and Documentation of Historical Sites

Observations were conducted at five key sites: Surosowan (Old Banten), Maulana Yusuf's Tomb, the Great Mosque of Banten, the Kasepuhan Palace Complex in Cirebon, and the Old Port of Sunda Kelapa. Observations included architecture, epigraphic markers, and the continuity of local scholarly traditions.

Spatial-Temporal Mapping

Fatahillah's mobility was quantitatively mapped based on the estimated duration of activity in each region (± 60 years / 8 regions = 7.5 years/region). This demonstrates the intensity and breadth of educational influence built through *da'wah* and Islamic boarding schools. Mufid, A. (2024)

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using Grounded Theory techniques according to Corbin and Strauss, through three stages:

- a) Main Activity Analysis Stage

- b) Open Coding: Identifying historical themes in texts (e.g., early Islamic boarding schools, the role of the tarekat, teaching systems)
- c) Axial Coding: Connecting themes across regions and time
- d) Selective Coding: Developing a narrative of Islamic education history based on Fatahillah's legacy

The analysis process was carried out iteratively and spirally, with source triangulation through texts, oral traditions, and site observations to produce a valid historical narrative rich in contextual meaning.

Data Validity and Credibility

Validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, while data credibility was strengthened by cross-referencing ancient manuscripts, field findings, and interviews with informants. The researcher also conducted peer debriefing with local historians from UIN Banten to avoid interpretation bias.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Historical Context of the Islamization of Banten

In the 16th century, Banten emerged as one of the most significant port cities in the international maritime trade network of the Southeast Asian region. Its strategic geographic location at the western tip of Java Island allowed Banten to serve not only as an economic center but also as a cultural and religious melting pot. This accessibility positioned Banten as a natural gateway for the spread of Islam, which entered through peaceful channels such as trade, intermarriage, cultural exchange, and the mobility of ulama and Sufi orders (ṭuruq).

The gradual weakening of the Hindu-Buddhist Pajajaran Kingdom, which had dominated the Sundanese uplands, created a political vacuum that was filled by emerging Islamic powers along the northern coastal regions of Java. Among these, the Banten Sultanate stood out due to its swift consolidation of political power and its ability to Islamize both the elite and common populations. This transformation was not executed through violence or revolution, but rather through a process of cultural accommodation (tawāfuq al-ʿurf wa al-dīn) and spiritual education rooted in Sufi traditions.

Historical accounts and oral traditions indicate that this Islamization process was championed by two central figures: Fatahillah and Maulana Hasanuddin, both of whom were connected to the broader network of Islamic resistance and spiritual leadership from the regions of Pasai, Demak, and Cirebon. Fatahillah, in particular, played a pivotal role not only in the military conquest of strategic locations such as Sunda Kelapa (later Jayakarta) but also in laying the groundwork for Islamic governance and religious education in Banten.

Rather than imposing Islam through coercion, Fatahillah employed a combination of political legitimacy, ethical leadership, and the establishment of religious institutions that resonated with the local populace. One of the defining features of his approach was the development of Islamic educational structures, such as pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and halaqah (religious study circles), which served as platforms for religious transmission, moral formation, and communal cohesion. These institutions nurtured a generation of scholars (ulama) and leaders who later played key roles in sustaining and expanding Islamic influence throughout the western part of Java.

This phase of Islamization illustrates the deep interconnection between religion, politics, and education, as well as the adaptability of Islam to the local Sundanese sociocultural context. The Sufi model of education emphasizing inner purification (tazkiyat an-nafs), ethical conduct

(akhlak), and communal responsibility proved to be highly effective in facilitating the acceptance of Islam among the previously Hindu-Buddhist society of Banten.

Furthermore, the establishment of Surosowan Palace as both an administrative center and an intellectual hub reflected the synthesis between governance and religious authority. The integration of religious scholars into the state apparatus allowed for the institutionalization of Islamic education, ensuring its sustainability across generations.

This multidimensional role of Fatahillah—military strategist, political leader, spiritual guide, and educational reformer reinforces the argument that the Islamization of Banten was a civilizational project, one that laid the foundations for a robust Islamic society that thrived for centuries. As highlighted by Fitriani (2022), Fatahillah's influence went beyond conquest; it was deeply embedded in the intellectual and spiritual transformation of Bantenese society. Fitriani, H. (2022).

Fatahillah as the Architect of Early Islamic Education

Fatahillah's legacy in the Islamization of Banten goes far beyond his military feats. His most enduring contribution lies in the formation of a comprehensive Islamic educational infrastructure, which served as the moral and epistemological backbone of the nascent Banten Sultanate. Drawing from the tradition of ulama-mujāhidīn (scholar-warriors), Fatahillah combined religious knowledge, political leadership, and spiritual guidance to embed Islamic teachings into the sociopolitical fabric of society.

Based on a triangulation of field observations, oral histories, and primary manuscripts, this study identifies four major strategies employed by Fatahillah in shaping Islamic education in early Banten:

Establishment of Halaqah-Based Learning in the Palace and Mosques

Fatahillah institutionalized regular study circles (halaqah) that focused on Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), Prophetic traditions (hadith), jurisprudence (fiqh), and spiritual purification (tasawuf). These halaqah operated not only in mosques but also within the palace complex of Surosowan, symbolizing the union of religious and political authority.

Utilization of Sufi Orders as Vehicles of Da'wah and Education

The spread of Islam in Java, including Banten, was strongly influenced by Sufi networks such as the Qadiriyyah and Syattariyyah orders. Fatahillah, who had earlier connections with centers of Islamic learning in Pasai and Mecca, likely adapted the pedagogical methods of these orders. His emphasis on inner transformation, discipline, and communal worship became foundational in shaping students' character.

Character-Centered Education

Unlike formal and institutionalized madrasah models, Fatahillah's pesantren tradition placed strong emphasis on ethical behavior, humility, service, and spiritual training (riyādhāt an-nafs). The goal was not merely intellectual mastery, but moral refinement and communal responsibility, mirroring the model practiced by his mentor and father-in-law, Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon.

Development of Cadre-Based Ulama Networks

Fatahillah invested in the training of religious cadres, both from among his own family lineage (including Maulana Hasanuddin) and from the local youth. These students, after undergoing years of spiritual-intellectual training, were then deployed as mubaligh (Islamic preachers) and community leaders throughout the western Java coastline.

The holistic nature of this educational model combining political, spiritual, intellectual, and moral components enabled the rapid institutionalization of Islam in Banten. As Lubis (2021) emphasizes, the pesantren founded or inspired by Fatahillah became centers not just of learning, but of identity formation, resistance, and continuity. Lubis, A. (2021).

Historical Evidence of the Existence of Educational Institutions

Field studies conducted in Surosowan (Old Banten), Cirebon, and Jepara reveal physical and textual evidence of early Islamic educational institutions attributed to Fatahillah and his circle. Architectural remnants, oral testimonies, and regional manuscripts collectively confirm the establishment of proto-pesantren models that included teaching spaces, prayer rooms (surau), and lodgings for students (santri).

For instance, archaeological surveys in the Surosowan complex show evidence of multi-functional spaces that functioned as centers for both governance and religious instruction. Similarly, in Cirebon and Jepara, traditions maintain that educational institutions associated with Fatahillah or his immediate family provided instruction in Qur'anic studies, tasawuf, and fiqh.

This multi-source confirmation is summarized in the following table:

Location	Year ±	Form of Institution	Related Figures	Historiographic Sources
Surosowan (Banten)	1527–1545	Pesantren Halaqah	Fatahillah, M. Hasanuddin	Sajarah Banten, Wawancara 2023
Kraton Kasepuhan	1525–1570	Majelis Ta'lim	Sunan Gunung Jati, Fatahillah	Babad Cirebon
Jepara	1524–1526	Surau & halaqah laut	Nyai Retna Ratu (istri Fatahillah)	Tradisi Lisan Jepara
Cirebon Pesisir	1527–1570	Pesantren Tarikat	Ulama tarekat binaan Fatahillah	Riset Lubis (2021), Aulia (2023)

These findings demonstrate that early Islamic education in Banten and its surrounding regions was not marginal nor incidental, but rather deeply rooted in a broader spiritual and political movement. Fatahillah's integration of local customs ('urf) with Islamic teachings, his strategic positioning of education within royal and religious settings, and his support for decentralized but spiritually coherent pesantren systems, all point to a deliberate and long-term educational vision.

The presence of such institutions across different regions linked by Fatahillah Pasai, Jepara, Cirebon, Banten suggests the existence of a trans-regional Islamic knowledge network, which was both indigenous and cosmopolitan in nature. This contradicts the colonial historiography that often portrayed Islamization as superficial and fragmented.

As the archaeological and oral data reveal, the educational legacy of Fatahillah laid a strong spiritual foundation that not only Islamized the region but also nurtured future generations of religious scholars, jurists, and political leaders in West Java.

4. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Fatahillah was not only a military and political figure in the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, but also a key architect in the

establishment of the early Islamic education system in the Banten region. Through a Sufi da'wah approach and the integration of Islamic values into the social structure, Fatahillah succeeded in establishing an educational foundation based on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), halaqah (religious circles), and ulama (religious scholars) communities.

The educational legacy left by Fatahillah, such as the early pesantren in Surosowan, the majelis ta'lim (religious study groups) in the palace, and the dissemination of moral and Sufism values, demonstrates that the process of Islamization in Banten was profound, gradual, and deeply rooted in community life. Education served not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a medium for cultural and social transformation, establishing Islam as a collective identity for the people of the west coast of Java.

From a historiographical perspective, these findings also critique the colonial narrative that reduced the role of Islam to mere political and power aspects. This research provides a new understanding that Fatahillah not only seized territory physically but also captured the spiritual and intellectual awareness of the community through education. Therefore, a just and comprehensive historical narrative must integrate cultural and scientific dimensions, not merely militaristic ones.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Islamic education in Banten has grown since the early 16th century as a systematic, structured, and long-term movement. Fatahillah's educational strategy, rooted in local wisdom, Islamic spirituality, and community empowerment, is worthy of inspiration for the development of a holistic and character-based contemporary Islamic education system.

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