



DA'WAH IN SABAH, MALAYSIA (1963-1973): Tun Datu Mustapha Effort and Contributions

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Abstract: This study examines the development of da'wah in Sabah after independence, focusing on the strategies and socio-political factors that led to the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1973. Although Islam had been introduced earlier through the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu, its institutional expansion remained limited under British colonial rule due to weak political support and the dominance of Christian missionary structures. Employing qualitative thematic analysis of archival documents, official reports, the Sabah State Constitution, and relevant secondary sources, this study analyzes how Tun Datu Mustapha and the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) strengthened Islam's institutional presence. Key initiatives included mosque construction, Islamic education, welfare support for mu'alaf, and the mobilization of transnational preachers. Interpreted through post-colonial governance, religious economy, and pluralism frameworks, the findings demonstrate that organized da'wah combined with political leadership significantly reshaped Sabah's religious demography and institutional structure, culminating in the constitutional recognition of Islam under Article 5(A). By foregrounding Sabah as an under-examined case within Southeast Asian Islamic history, this study contributes empirically to debates on Islamization in plural societies, highlighting how state authority, organizational capacity, and inter-religious competition interact in shaping religious transformation.

Keywords: Da'wah, Islamization, Mu'alaf, Sabah, Tun Datu Mustapha.

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Introduction

LOCATED at the northern periphery of Borneo, Sabah has historically functioned as a meeting point of maritime trade,

shifting sovereignties, and religious encounter. Islam reached the region through the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu,¹ embedding early Muslim influence within coastal polities. Yet, despite these historical roots, Islamic institutional development during the colonial era remained comparatively fragile.² British administrative priorities did not centre on strengthening Islamic governance. Instead, Christian missionary organisations, supported by structured educational and medical networks, consolidated their presence across rural and indigenous communities.³ Over time, this asymmetry of institutional support shaped a competitive religious landscape in which Islam appeared socially present but administratively underdeveloped.⁴

The situation began to change markedly after Sabah's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963. At the centre of this transition stood Tun Datu Mustapha (1918–1995), a pivotal political figure who served as Sabah's first Yang di-Pertua Negeri and subsequently as Chief Minister. His political career cannot be understood solely through the lens of state formation or party consolidation. Rather, his leadership reflected an intertwined vision of governance and religious repositioning. For Tun Mustapha, Islam was not confined to personal belief; it constituted a framework for social reorganisation within a newly federated state. This orientation became institutionalised through the United

¹ Sharifah Darmia Sharif Adam, "Education Challenges in Sabah Before 1963," *International Journal of Modern Education* 5, no. 17 (2023): 32.

² Zaifuddin Md Rasip, "The Transformation of Islam in Sabah in the Post-independence Era: History, Da'wah Strategies, and Demographic Changes," *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication* 10, no. 40 (2025): 637.

³ Hazmi Mohd Rusli, Mohd Ridwan Talib, Rahtami Susanti, and Ika Ariani Kartini, "Malaysia's Indisputable Sovereignty over Sabah," *Kosmik Hukum* 23, no. 3 (2023): 293.

⁴ Zaifuddin Md Rasip, Suhaila Abdul Muin, Habibah@Artini Ramlie, Dg Hafizah Ag Basir, and Rozeeda Kadri, "Competing Faiths Under Colonial Rule: Islamic Expansion, Christian Missionaries, and the Emergence of Mualaf in the Making of Religious Identity in Sabah," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 14, no. 2 (2025): 1446.

Sabah Islamic Association (USIA), which functioned as the principal organisational vehicle for structured da'wah.⁵

Established to coordinate religious outreach across Sabah, USIA did more than facilitate individual conversions. It organised mosque construction, expanded religious education, provided welfare assistance for mualaf, and developed networks that connected political authority with grassroots religious engagement.⁶ Through these mechanisms, da'wah acquired administrative coherence and strategic direction. Islamisation during this period was therefore not an incidental by-product of political change; it unfolded as a deliberate institutional project.

Nevertheless, Islamisation in Sabah did not occur within a religious vacuum. It unfolded in a plural society characterised by sustained inter-religious interaction, particularly with long-established Christian missions. The declaration of Islam as Sabah's state religion in 1973 emerged from this context of negotiation and competition. It was preceded by a decade of organisational consolidation, political recalibration, and expanding religious infrastructure.⁷ The constitutional recognition of Islam subsequently facilitated the establishment of religious councils, Shariah courts, and zakat institutions, embedding Islamic governance within the state apparatus. This marked a structural transformation in state–religion relations rather than a merely symbolic declaration.

Against this historical and institutional backdrop, the article examines how organised da'wah under Tun Datu Mustapha and USIA functioned as a structured instrument of Islamic consolidation in post-independence Sabah.⁸ The discussion moves beyond outreach strategies alone. It considers the political constraints and economic pressures that shaped Islamic initiatives,

⁵ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Pg Mohd Faezulfikri Ag Omar, and Noor Afiqahatirah Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah: 1963–1973," *Akademika* 90, no. 1 (2020): 182.

⁶ Zuraida Tabari "Process of Preaching in the Islam of the Murut Tribes in Tenom, Sabah." *Jurnal Borneo Arkhailogia* 9, no. 1 (2025): 133.

⁷ Rasip et al., "Competing Faiths Under Colonial Rule," 1447.

⁸ Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah," 186.

as well as the missionary competition that framed religious negotiation during this period. By tracing the interaction between executive leadership, organisational capacity, and demographic transformation, the discussion clarifies how these processes culminated in the constitutional recognition of Islam as Sabah's state religion and the subsequent embedding of Islamic institutions within the state apparatus.

The analysis is grounded in qualitative historical inquiry. Archival materials, census records, constitutional documents, government reports, and relevant scholarly studies provide the evidentiary foundation for reconstructing this formative decade. The study situates Islamization within post-colonial governance, religious economy, and pluralism theory. Patterns of institutional growth and demographic change are identified through thematic reading with attention to evidentiary balance in a plural society.

Scholarly discussions on Sabah have frequently approached Tun Datu Mustapha from political or administrative perspectives, emphasising party realignments, federal–state dynamics, and developmental policy.⁹ Studies on religion, meanwhile, often foreground colonial constructions of religious identity or demographic competition within a plural society.¹⁰ While these analyses provide important insights, they tend to treat da'wah either as background context or as an auxiliary dimension of political authority. Insufficient attention has been given to organised da'wah (1963–1973) as a structured socio-political strategy within post-colonial governance. It would be reductive to interpret Islam's expansion during this decade solely as theological propagation; it also reflected institutional recalibration, identity negotiation, and strategic engagement with indigenous communities.

⁹ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Syamsul Azizul Marinsah, Amer Hudhaifah Hamzah, and Zaifuddin Md Rasip, *Dakwah, Pendidikan dan Sosial Islam di Sabah: Isu Terpilih dan Cabaran Semasa* (Kota Kinabalu: Fakulti Pengajian Islam, UMS, 2025): 10.

¹⁰ Nazihah Rusli and Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf After Conversion to Islam: A Study on the Apostasy (Murtad) Cases in Malaysia." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences* 12, no. 8 (2022): 540.

This article therefore contends that the da'wah initiatives undertaken under Tun Datu Mustapha's leadership constituted a systematic reconfiguration of Sabah's religious order. By situating these developments within broader Southeast Asian patterns of post-colonial Islamic revival, religious economy, and plural governance, this study reframes regional political leadership as a catalyst for organised religious restructuring in multicultural societies.¹¹ The article repositions Sabah's Islamization within contemporary Islamic studies as an institutional and historically mediated process.

Discussion

Sabah's religious transformation did not unfold as a simple process of conversion. It involved a reconfiguration of religious authority shaped by colonial asymmetry, executive leadership, and the institutional consolidation of da'wah. Christianity strengthened its position through educational and welfare infrastructures developed during the colonial period, whereas Islam initially depended on community resilience before gaining structured support under Tun Datu Mustapha through USIA.¹² The demographic shift and the constitutional recognition of Islam in 1973 reflected the growing capacity of political authority to reshape the religious order within a plural society.

Viewed through religious economy and pluralism frameworks, this transformation exceeded doctrinal expansion and depended on institutional sustainability and inter-religious balance. In this respect, Sabah offers a regional example of executive-driven religious restructuring in a multicultural post-colonial context.

Pre-Independence Era of Sabah-Malaysia

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the people of Sabah practiced animism, grounding social life in ritual

¹¹ Syed Hamid, Sharifah Sara Hasliza and Akhmetova, E., "Islam and Politics in Malaysia: The Realization of Islam as a State Religion in Sabah," *Journal of Islam in Asia* 16, no. 2 (2019): 317.

¹² Suraya Sintang, "Conversion to Islam and Christianity among the Kadazan Dusun Community in Sabah," *Jurnal Usuluddin* 18 (2003): 67.

relationships with nature. Islam spread through the support of the Brunei Sultanate, which introduced mosques and madrasas without abruptly displacing local traditions. By the 15th century, Brunei's maritime influence accelerated Islamization along the coastal regions.¹³ Its rulers became reference points for local elites, facilitating religious diffusion through political and social alignment rather than confrontation.

In the early 19th century, Christian missionaries entered Sabah, introducing new religious competition.¹⁴ British administration intertwined economic governance with missionary expansion, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun.¹⁵ Missionary work was closely embedded within imperial structures. Through education, welfare services, and logistical networks such as Missionary Aviation Fellowship flights, Christianity reached remote districts while consolidating long-term affiliation.¹⁶

Between 1940 and 1963, Christian schools expanded from 27 to 121 institutions. Churches such as St. James Anglican Church in Kudat and St. Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society in Sandakan functioned as centres of worship, education, and community organization.¹⁷ Colonial backing of schools, clinics, and hospitals strengthened Christianity's institutional presence, leaving legacies that endured beyond independence.¹⁸

¹³ Rasip, "The Transformation of Islam in Sabah," 637.

¹⁴ Kana, Maria Perpetua. *Christian Mission in Malaysia: Past Emphasis, Present Engagement, and Future Possibilities*. Master's thesis, Australian Catholic University, 2004: 29

¹⁵ Johannatan Jolius, "Strategi dan Cabaran Mubaligh Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) dalam Dakwah Kristianisasi Masyarakat Dusun di Ranau (1937–1990)." *Jurnal Borneo Arkhailogia* 9, no. 1 (2024): 121.

¹⁶ Clinson Mojijang and Maureen De Silva, "The Role of Protestant Church in Sabah (PCS) in the Social Development of Rungus Society 1952–1993 in Kudat, Sabah," *Jurnal Borneo Arkhailogia* 5, no. 1 (2020): 93–94.

¹⁷ Kok On Low dan Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "The Impact of Christianity on Traditional Agricultural Practices and Beliefs among the Kimaragang of Sabah: A Preliminary Study," *Asian Ethnology* 74, no. 2 (2015): 403.

¹⁸ Bainol Lazimin, "Christianization Strategies in Kota Marudu District, 1985–1994," *Jurnal Borneo Arkhailogia* 3, no 2 (2018): 186.

Islam, by contrast, lacked comparable structural support. By 1970, only 68 Islamic religious schools operated in Sabah, far fewer than Christian institutions. Policies such as the “Concentration of Mohammedan Community” restricted Muslim interaction with non-Muslims and narrowed da’wah opportunities.¹⁹ The imbalance was evident. State structures facilitated missionary growth while limiting Islamic institutional expansion.

Despite these limitations, Muslim preachers continued to provide informal education and organize voluntary activities. Islamic schools, though fewer in number, nurtured young Muslims and preserved religious identity.²⁰ This resilience illustrates how Islam survived not through institutional power but through community-level efforts, highlighting the role of religious agency under structural constraints.

Demography of Islam and Christianity in Pre-Independence Era

Colonial policies toward Christianity and Islam produced divergent demographic trajectories, as reflected in Sabah’s population census between 1921 and 1960. Table 1 records changes in religious composition during this period and illustrates Islam’s gradual growth alongside Christianity’s accelerated expansion under British colonial administration.

Table 1: Religious Composition in Sabah (1921-1960)

Bil	Religion	1921	1931	1951	1960
1	Islam	81,886 (32%)	86,713 (32%)	115,126 (37%)	173,240 (38%)
2	Christian	6,980 (3%)	10,454 (4%)	29,092 (9%)	75,247 (17%)
3	Buddhist, Hindu, Others	33,513 (13%)	41,463 (15%)	33,513 (11%)	206,740 (46%)
4	No Religion, Unknown	135,426 (53%)	131,593 (49%)	135,425 (43%)	-
Total Population		257,804 (100%)	270,223 (100%)	313,156 (100%)	454,311 (100%)

Source: *North Borneo Census (1921, 1931, 1951) and Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (1960)*

¹⁹ Muhamad Amar Mahmad, Solahuddin Abdul Hamid, and Mohd Akram Dato’ Dahaman, “Proselytizing Development In Sabah: A Historical Study About 1946-1990,” *Journal of Islam and Science* 3, no. 1 (2015): 11.

²⁰ Hashim Fauzy Yaacob, “Orientalist Perspectives on Islam in Borneo,” 62.

As shown in Table 1, Islam remained the majority religion, increasing from 32% in 1921 to 38% in 1960. The increase was gradual rather than dramatic. Muslim communities operated with limited institutional resources and depended largely on voluntary da'wah, kinship networks, and informal religious instruction.²¹ In practical terms, continuity was sustained through communal initiative rather than through structural advantage.

Christianity expanded under different circumstances. Its growth from 3% to 17% illustrates the effectiveness of missionary strategies that were closely embedded within colonial governance. Education, healthcare, and welfare were not secondary components but formed part of a coordinated religious outreach. Through the integration of these services with doctrinal instruction, missionary networks reduced barriers to conversion and strengthened affiliation among indigenous communities such as the Kadazandusun.²² Institutional support, therefore, shaped patterns of religious adherence in measurable ways.

Meanwhile, the "No Religion, Unknown" category declined sharply, signaling the erosion of animistic traditions and the increasing consolidation of organized religions. The rise of the "Buddhist, Hindu, Others" category to 46% in 1960 was largely driven by Chinese and Indian migration, reinforcing Sabah's multicultural religious landscape. Overall, the demographic data indicate a clear asymmetry: Christianity benefited from institutional privilege, whereas Islam advanced more slowly but with notable resilience. Comparable patterns in Aceh, South Sulawesi, and Mindanao show how religions supported by state authority or missionary infrastructure expanded more rapidly than those sustained primarily through community-based traditions.

²¹ Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah," 185.

²² Judy Berinai. "Exploring Indigenous Spirituality: The Religio-Cultural Background of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah." *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (2024): 36.

The Independence of Sabah

Sabah's independence was a pivotal development in the formation of Malaysia and formed part of Britain's broader effort to reorganize Southeast Asian territories within a structured administrative framework. Formerly known as North Borneo, the territory became a British protectorate in 1888, with Britain managing external affairs while local governance remained internal. Sabah achieved self-government on 31 August 1963 and joined Malaysia on 16 September 1963, alongside Sarawak, Singapore, and Malaya. This process reflected Britain's "Grand Design," which sought to secure political stability while countering communist influence during the Cold War. The Cobbold Commission Report revealed that most communities in Sabah supported integration into Malaysia, largely because they anticipated improvements in infrastructure, education, and economic opportunity.²³

By 1960, Islam constituted 38% of the population, while Christianity accounted for 17%. These figures indicate that religious institutions had already become central actors within colonial and early post-colonial society. Islam expanded gradually through da'wah networks and through the establishment of organizations such as USIA, which invested in mosque construction and Islamic schooling. Christianity, in contrast, continued to grow through missionary provision of schools, clinics, and welfare services. Access to education and healthcare functioned as a form of soft influence, lowering the costs of conversion and embedding religious capital within indigenous communities.

The simultaneous growth of Islam and Christianity underscores the transformative impact of religion on Sabah's socio-political identity at the threshold of independence.²⁴ The

²³ A. Rahman Tang Abdullah and Saidah Alih, "The Process of Independence of Sabah and Sarawak (1961–1963): A Reassessment of Legal Application in the Formation of Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 26.

²⁴ Suraya Sintang, Assis Kamu, and Mohd Nazmi Mohd Khalli, "Social Interaction in Muslim–Christian Relations in Kota Kinabalu and Keningau, Sabah," *Kajian Malaysia* 42, no. 2 (2024): 289.

coexistence of both faiths shaped a society that was religiously diverse yet politically cohesive. Religious dynamism during this period influenced community values and contributed to Sabah's integration into Malaysia, where religion operated both as a marker of cultural identity and as a source of political legitimacy.

Islam in Post-Independence Sabah: Institutional Constraints and Community Resilience

Following independence, Islam remained the dominant religion in Sabah, yet it had not attained majority status and its early expansion progressed cautiously. Growth during this period was relatively modest. One significant factor was the absence of firm political support, as much of the state leadership consisted of non-Muslim figures, which limited the development of Islamic policy initiatives.²⁵ The institutional configuration of Sabah's early statehood reproduced a plural distribution of power that left Islamic administration comparatively under-resourced. Legislative endorsement was limited, and budgetary commitment to Islamic affairs remained constrained. Islamic growth depended more on communal initiative than on state capacity.

The composition of the Sabah cabinet in 1963 reflected the broader religious and ethnic diversity of the population. Tun Fuad Donald Stephen, a Christian, served as the first Chief Minister, and his later conversion to Islam in 1969 represented an important symbolic development. Nevertheless, Muslim representation within executive structures remained limited.²⁶ Of the eleven cabinet posts, only two were held by Muslims, while Tun Mustapha, as Yang di-Pertua Negeri (Governor), occupied a largely ceremonial office without executive authority. This distribution of power restricted the ability of Muslim leaders to prioritise mosque construction, religious education, and structured da'wah initiatives.

²⁵ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, "Ethnic Migration: The Multi-Ethnic Muslim Diaspora in Sabah," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* 11, no. 1 (2024): 78.

²⁶ Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah," 186.

The limited presence of Muslims in strategic administrative positions had tangible implications for Islamic development. Programmes such as mosque expansion, curriculum reform, and the incorporation of Islamic values into governance structures did not receive sustained institutional attention.²⁷ Weak bureaucratic embedding reduced policy continuity, leaving many initiatives dependent on voluntary and fragmented community action. In rural districts particularly, local communities assumed responsibility for maintaining Islamic identity through small religious classes, mosque committees, and informal da'wah circles.

Despite these institutional constraints, grassroots resilience remained evident. Muslim leaders organised culturally adaptive da'wah programmes and tailored outreach strategies to local conditions²⁸. These efforts preserved religious continuity even in the absence of strong state sponsorship. At the same time, asymmetry with Christian missions persisted. Whereas missionary organisations operated with established institutional infrastructures, Islamic communities relied largely on personal commitment and limited material resources.

In summary, Islam in post-independence Sabah experienced modest growth under significant structural constraints. Political representation, fiscal allocation, and institutional embedding directly shaped religious outcomes. The experience of this period suggests that sustainable expansion required coherent policy frameworks rather than reliance on dispersed community effort alone.

The Growth of Christianity and the Decline of Other Religions

Christianity experienced notable expansion after independence. Its proportion increased from 17% (75,247 people) in 1960 to 24% (157,422 people) in 1970, and reached 27% (258,606 people) by 1980. The rise was linked to sustained missionary engagement through schools, clinics, and welfare programmes in

²⁷ Azarudin Awang, Azman Che Mat, and Ruhaizah Abdul Ghani, "Challenges of Muallaf in Building Muslim Identity in Malaysia," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 8 (2022): 1190.

²⁸ Syed Hamid and Akhmetova, "Islam and Politics in Malaysia," 316.

rural areas. These institutions created social networks that strengthened long-term affiliation. In practical terms, literacy, healthcare access, and opportunities for social mobility were offered alongside religious instruction, making affiliation both spiritually and materially meaningful.²⁹ The continuing influence of infrastructure developed during the British period further reinforced missionary networks, allowing Christian organisations to maintain a competitive position even as Islamic da'wah expanded through USIA.

During the same period, traditional beliefs and minority religions grouped under the category "Others" declined sharply, from 46% in 1960 to 7% by 1980. The scale of this reduction indicates a significant demographic shift from animistic traditions toward more structured and institutionalised religious systems. Organised religions such as Islam and Christianity offered clearer doctrinal frameworks, educational institutions, and welfare structures that resonated with communities navigating processes of modernization. By 1980, a "non-religious" category had also emerged, reaching 6%, reflecting the gradual influence of secular education and modern ideological currents introduced during both colonial and early post-colonial periods. At the same time, small Buddhist and Hindu communities recorded modest growth, largely associated with migrant labour inflows, further contributing to Sabah's evolving multicultural identity.

The contrasting trajectories of Islam and Christianity underscore the competitive dynamics of religious propagation in Sabah.³⁰ Christian missions advanced through established institutional infrastructures, while Islamic expansion, particularly through USIA, relied on culturally sensitive da'wah strategies and inclusive outreach. The concurrent growth of both traditions reshaped Sabah into a society that was religiously diverse while

²⁹ Zaifuddin Md Rasip, Rahayu Handan, Mohd Zulfahmi Mohamad, and Amer Hudhaifah Hamzah, "Challenges of Religious Integration among Indigenous Muslim Converts (Mualaf) in Sabah, Malaysia," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 5 (2025): 608.

³⁰ Nur Azian Aratin and Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, "Religious Sensitivity in Sabah: An Overview Study," *Jurnal Islam dan Masyarakat Kontemporari* 23, no. 3 (2022): 184.

remaining politically cohesive. Colonial legacies, missionary organisation, and Islamic renewal interacted in complex ways, collectively transforming the socio-religious landscape as Sabah moved toward deeper integration within Malaysia.

Tun Datu Mustapha's Mission in Da'wah

In the early years following Sabah's independence, Muslims had not yet attained majority status. This reality posed a significant obstacle to the effort to declare Islam as the state religion. During the administration of the first Chief Minister, Tun Fuad Donald Stephen, who was then a Christian, political support and administrative infrastructure for Islamic institutions such as religious councils remained limited. Government priorities during this period focused largely on the Kadazandusun community, the majority of whom were Christian, and this inevitably constrained the institutional growth of Islam.³¹ The structure of plural power-sharing within the state meant that Muslim representation in key decision-making positions remained restricted.

Faced with these limitations, Tun Mustapha chose to resign from his position as Yang di-Pertua Negeri in order to contest the state elections. His electoral victory in 1967 and subsequent appointment as Chief Minister marked a decisive turning point in Sabah's political and religious landscape.³² Leadership during this phase deliberately fused political authority with religious commitment. Muslim representation in the cabinet increased, signaling a clearer orientation toward embedding Islam within state institutions. The establishment of the Islamic Religious Council and the Religious Affairs Department followed, and in 1969 USIA was founded.³³ Through USIA, da'wah assumed a more structured form, coordinating mosque construction, expanding Islamic education, and providing welfare assistance for mualaf. These initiatives extended outreach into rural districts and

³¹ Rasip et al., "Competing Faiths Under Colonial Rule," 1445.

³² Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah, 182.

³³ Hajimin et al., *Dakwah, Pendidikan dan Sosial Islam di Sabah*, 11.

reinforced Muslim identity through infrastructure, schooling, and community support mechanisms.

A critical reading, however, reveals both consolidation and vulnerability. Mustapha's initiatives significantly enhanced Islam's institutional visibility and administrative capacity, yet their expansion was closely tied to centralized political authority and resource patronage. Critics observed that the rapid proliferation of mosques and Islamic schools occasionally outpaced the availability of trained teachers and sustainable funding.³⁴ Symbolic gestures of Islamization strengthened Muslim confidence but also carried the risk of heightening sensitivities among Christian and indigenous communities. In comparative terms, Sabah's trajectory differed from Aceh's legalistic Islamization and from South Sulawesi's civil-society-driven movements, underscoring Sabah's distinctive reliance on executive-centered leadership.

Through these political, social, and da'wah initiatives, Tun Mustapha undeniably expanded the Muslim population and strengthened Islam's institutional presence in Sabah. His legacy, however, cannot be reduced to a singular narrative of success. It also represents an experiment in state-led da'wah that combined visionary leadership with structural fragility. The experience highlights the continuing need to balance political authority, community participation, and interfaith sensitivity within a plural society.

Leadership and Legacy: Tun Datu Mustapha's Contributions to Da'wah

Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun, born on 31 August 1918 in Kudat, emerged as one of the central figures in Sabah's political and Islamic development. Serving as Sabah's first Governor from 1963 to 1965 and later as Chief Minister between 1967 and 1976, he presided over a period marked by significant social and institutional transformation. In 1961, he founded the United Sabah

³⁴ Maznah Mohamad, "Religion and Politics in Malaysian Nation-Building: A 'Double-Movement' of Hegemonic and Plural Islam," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 445.

National Organization (USNO), a movement that advanced Muslim bumiputera interests and contributed directly to Sabah's role in the formation of Malaysia. The establishment of USIA in 1969 marked another decisive step, providing a structured foundation for organized da'wah in the state.³⁵ Through mosque construction, expansion of Islamic education, and welfare assistance for mualaf, USIA extended Islam's reach among indigenous communities and reinforced the institutional framework of Islamic practice.

Mustapha's engagement was not confined to the domestic sphere. He co-founded the Muslim World League and participated actively in PERKIM (Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization), linking Sabah to broader transnational Islamic networks.³⁶ These connections situated Sabah within a wider global da'wah movement and reflected the circulation of ideas and resources across post-colonial Muslim societies. At the same time, reliance on international alliances raised questions regarding sustainability and dependency. External funding and the presence of foreign preachers occasionally generated sensitivities within Sabah's inter-religious environment. Rapid mosque construction and conversion campaigns strengthened institutional visibility, yet critics argued that expansion sometimes outpaced the availability of trained religious personnel and long-term administrative planning.

Tun Mustapha passed away on 2 January 1995 due to heart disease, yet his influence remains deeply embedded in Sabah's historical memory. He is widely regarded as the "Father of Sabah's Independence" and as a prominent architect of Islamic institutional development. His contributions were recognized domestically with the title "Tun" and internationally by the Republic of Lebanon.³⁷ Nevertheless, his legacy resists simple categorization. Visionary leadership accelerated Islam's institutional consolidation, but the same model exposed structural

³⁵ Hamdan Aziz, "The Role of USIA in Education, Da'wah, and Politics in Sabah, Malaysia, 1969–1976," *Jurnal Kajian Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 1, no. 2 (2013): 175.

³⁶ Rasip, "The Transformation of Islam in Sabah," 643.

³⁷ Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah, 183.

vulnerabilities, including centralization of authority, reliance on political office, and the enduring challenge of maintaining inclusivity within a plural society.

Tun Datu Mustapha as Founder of USIA as a Da'wah Platform

Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun understood that strengthening Islam in Sabah required a systematic and carefully planned approach, particularly after assuming the office of Chief Minister in 1967.³⁸ His long-term objective included amending the state constitution so that Islam could be formally declared the state religion. Such a declaration would allow the establishment and consolidation of institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council, the Department of Islamic Affairs, Baitulmal, and zakat bodies.³⁹ In this context, Islam was not treated merely as a personal belief system but as part of a broader effort to embed religious authority within the administrative structure of the state.⁴⁰ The initiative, however, faced significant constraints, as Muslims had not yet achieved demographic majority and political backing remained uneven.

In response to these challenges, Mustapha founded the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in 1969 to coordinate Islamic da'wah efforts across Sabah. USIA brought together three existing organizations, namely Persatuan Islam Tawau (PIT), Persatuan Islam Putatan (PIP), and Persatuan Islam Sabah (PIS), under a single coordinated structure.⁴¹ This consolidation reduced fragmentation and enabled da'wah activities to operate more consistently across districts. Through USIA, programmes such as religious lectures, Islamic study classes, and welfare support for

³⁸ Zaifuddin Md Rasip, Issraq Ramli, and Amer Hudhaifah Hamzah. "Mualaf in Sabah: A Study on the Factors Behind the Increase in Mualaf and the Challenges They Face." *Al-Qanadir: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2025): 3.

³⁹ Hajimin et al., *Dakwah, Pendidikan dan Sosial Islam di Sabah*, 12.

⁴⁰ Wan Ahmad Fauzi Wan Hussain, Anisah Che Ngah dan Mohamed Anwar Omar, "Islam as the Religion of the Federation: A Historical Legal Study," *Jurnal Akademika* 87, no. 3 (2017): 184.

⁴¹ Syamruddin Nasution and Abd. Ghofur. "The Development of Islam in Sabah, Malaysia (A Socio-Historical Perspective)." *Media Ilmiah Komunikasi Umat Beragama* 9, no. 2 (2017): 164.

mualaf were expanded, allowing outreach to reach rural and indigenous communities more effectively.

Another challenge concerned the shortage of locally trained religious scholars. To address this gap, Mustapha invited preachers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Peninsular Malaysia. In 1974, eighteen Indonesian scholars were brought to Sabah, and their involvement significantly influenced districts such as Ranau and Keningau through mosque construction, religious instruction, and community engagement.⁴² While the presence of foreign scholars accelerated the process of Islamization, it also highlighted structural vulnerability. Dependence on external manpower raised concerns regarding long-term sustainability and underscored the importance of developing local religious leadership.

USIA's rapid expansion, increasing membership, and growing network of branches marked a decisive phase in the institutionalization of da'wah in Sabah.⁴³ At the same time, reliance on executive authority and external expertise carried inherent risks. Long-term resilience depended not only on political will but also on inclusive participation and stable institutional development. Nevertheless, USIA played a transformative role in expanding Islam's presence and embedding religious infrastructure within Sabah's socio-political fabric, positioning Tun Mustapha as a central architect of state-supported da'wah.

Enhancing The Role of USIA as Education and Development for Muslims

The establishment of USIA marked an important turning point in the development of Islam in Sabah. For the first time, da'wah operated within a unified and coordinated platform rather than through scattered local initiatives. By consolidating previously fragmented efforts, USIA introduced an approach that brought together Islamization, education, and socio-economic development in a single framework. Its expansion into remote and underserved

⁴² Rasip, "The Transformation of Islam in Sabah," 645.

⁴³ Suraya Sintang, "Conversion to Islam and Christianity among the Kadazan Dusun Community in Sabah," 67.

districts allowed it to function as the first coordinated institution dedicated to strengthening Islamization across the state.⁴⁴ In practical terms, this development signaled a transition from informal preaching activities toward a more structured and administratively organized form of religious outreach. Beyond da'wah itself, the emphasis placed on education and welfare created foundations for longer-term institutional continuity and positioned USIA as a key actor in reshaping Sabah's socio-religious landscape.⁴⁵

A significant constraint during its formative years was demographic reality. Muslims constituted less than half of the population, which required careful engagement with non-Muslim communities. USIA therefore directed its outreach toward groups such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus, adopting culturally sensitive methods that incorporated Islamic teachings within familiar local customs and practices.⁴⁶ This approach reduced resistance and encouraged gradual acceptance. Attention was also given to influential community leaders whose personal conversion could influence wider networks. At the same time, Muslim political actors were engaged so that religious objectives and political authority could reinforce one another. In this setting, da'wah effectiveness depended not only on theological persuasion but also on access to social trust and political networks.

USIA's initiatives extended beyond religious instruction to include practical improvements in education and livelihood. The establishment of Islamic schools, training programmes, and community development projects sought to address structural disadvantages faced by Muslims in rural Sabah. Nevertheless, rapid expansion generated certain vulnerabilities. In some cases,

⁴⁴ Jauhari Hasan and Muhd Syahrul Nizam. "Strategi United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) dalam Mengembangkan Dakwah di Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia." *Jurnal Manajemen Dakwah* 3, no. 1 (2017): 17.

⁴⁵ Hajimin, Ag Omar & Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah," 189.

⁴⁶ Suraya Sintang, "History of the Development of Converts in Sabah: The Role and Contribution of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA)," *Jurnal al-Tamaddun*, no. 1 (2005): 56.

institutional growth moved faster than the availability of trained teachers and administrative resources. Dependence on political patronage also meant that USIA's stability remained sensitive to changes in leadership. Even with these limitations, the integration of education, welfare, and religious instruction strengthened socio-economic resilience within Muslim communities and reinforced Islamic identity. Over time, USIA's model demonstrated how culturally attentive and multi-dimensional da'wah could influence the broader social fabric of a plural society.

Remarkable Efforts of Tun and USIA in Reverting Influential Figures

USIA's achievements under Tun Datu Mustapha are frequently associated with the conversion of prominent political and community leaders. Among the most significant was Tun Fuad Stephens, the *Huguan Siou* of the Kadazandusun, who embraced Islam in 1971. His conversion marked a decisive symbolic moment. As a widely respected indigenous leader, his decision carried considerable weight and enhanced the credibility of da'wah among local communities. It also signaled Islam's increasing legitimacy within Sabah's political leadership. Other influential figures, including Dato Ghani Gilong and Suffian Koroh, likewise embraced Islam, indicating that USIA's outreach extended beyond grassroots networks to members of the political elite.⁴⁷

These high-profile conversions coincided with measurable demographic change. The Muslim population rose from 38.7% in 1967 to 53% by 1976. Alignment between political authority and religious affiliation created momentum that encouraged broader community acceptance. At the same time, this development invited scrutiny. Rapid elite-led conversions could be interpreted as politically strategic rather than purely spiritual. Even so, the cumulative effect was substantial. Islam's position within both

⁴⁷ Hajimin, Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah, Abang Mohd Razif Abang Muis, Saifulazry Mokhtar, Irma Wani Othman, Mohd Sohaimi Esa, Romzi Ationg, and Jais Abdul Hamid. "Dawah Movement and its Impact on the Increase of Muslim Composition in Sabah." *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication* 6, no. 23 (2024): 133.

governance and society strengthened considerably during this formative decade.

The Success of Da'wah and Demographic Changes

During Tun Mustapha's tenure, da'wah activities expanded at an unprecedented pace. More than 75,000 individuals embraced Islam between 1969 and 1976. When the children of mualaf families are included, the figure approaches 100,000. Such numbers reflect more than individual religious choice; they indicate a broader process of social transformation in which Islam's institutional presence expanded across state and community structures. A highly visible episode occurred in 1974 when the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Kota Kinabalu was purchased and subsequently converted into a mosque.⁴⁸ The event carried strong symbolic meaning, demonstrating Islam's increasing authority in the public sphere while simultaneously raising questions regarding interfaith sensitivity and long-term social harmony.

USIA's inclusive and culturally attentive outreach attracted both ordinary villagers and influential public figures. In this context, da'wah operated not only as religious instruction but also as a catalyst for demographic restructuring.⁴⁹ Yet institutional expansion also exposed structural limits. Dependence on political patronage and executive authority meant that sustainability required careful management. Tun Mustapha's period of leadership is often described as a golden era of Islamic expansion in Sabah, though its legacy includes both enduring institutional growth and complex inter-religious dynamics that continue to shape the state's plural society.

Increase in the Muslim Population After Independence

Table 2 presents the growth of the Muslim population in Sabah from 1960 to 1980, alongside changes in other major religious groups.

⁴⁸ Rasip, "The Transformation of Islam in Sabah," 646.

⁴⁹ Sintang, "History of the Development of Converts in Sabah," 64.

Table 2: Religious Composition in Sabah (1960–1980)

No	Religion	1960	1970	1980
1	Islam	173,240 (38%)	260,945 (40%)	487,627 (51.3%)
2	Christian	75,247 (17%)	157,422 (24%)	258,606 (27.2%)
3	Buddhist	-	63,313 (10%)	78,868 (8.3%)
4	Hindu	-	-	2,896 (0.3%)
5	Others	206,740 (46%)	94,495 (14%)	65,078 (6.8%)
6	Non-religious	-	75,131 (12%)	57,481 (6.1%)
	Total	454,311 (100%)	651,403 (100%)	950,556 (100%)

Source: Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (1960, 1970, 1980)

Between 1960 and 1980, the Muslim population grew from 38% to 51%, while Christianity expanded from 17% to 27%. This dual growth reflects a demographic shift from traditional animism (“Others”), which declined from 46% to 7%, toward institutionalized religions offering education, welfare, and structured belief systems. Islam’s rise was largely driven by intensified da’wah efforts under Tun Datu Mustapha, whose culturally sensitive strategies targeted indigenous groups such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus.⁵⁰ Through mosque construction, religious education, and mualaf support, USIA transformed religious identity into social mobility, illustrating a religious economy dynamic reinforced by access to community networks.

At the same time, Christianity’s continued growth indicates that missionary institutions retained influence, particularly in education and healthcare. The coexistence of Islamic expansion with Christian growth supports pluralism theory, where multiple religions adapt within a shared society. However, Islam’s rapid increase also relied heavily on political leadership and institutional patronage, raising questions about sustainability and inclusivity within Sabah’s multi-religious landscape.

(f) Transforming Sabah’s Religious Landscape: Islamization, Pluralism, and State Formation

The demographic shifts that followed independence marked a decisive reconfiguration of Sabah’s religious landscape. By 1980,

⁵⁰ Rasip et al., “Competing Faiths Under Colonial Rule,” 1449.

Islam had emerged as the dominant religion, closely associated with organized da'wah initiatives and the political leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha.⁵¹ The steady expansion of mosques, Islamic schools, and welfare institutions strengthened religious attachment at the community level and reinforced patterns of conversion and continuity. Christianity, meanwhile, consolidated its position as the second-largest religion through established missionary institutions and educational networks, sustaining a structured yet competitive dynamic between the two faiths.⁵²

Rather than displacing one another, Islam and Christianity continued to adapt within the same social and political environment. The sharp decline of traditional beliefs and minority religions indicates a broader demographic shift toward organized and institutionally supported religious systems. Processes of modernization, expanded educational access, and structured religious programming contributed to this transition.

At the same time, rapid Islamization revealed certain structural limitations. Dependence on political patronage meant that institutional growth remained closely tied to executive authority, making it potentially vulnerable to shifts in leadership.⁵³ Nevertheless, religion had by this period become a central element in shaping Sabah's cultural identity and its integration into the broader Malaysian nation-state.⁵⁴

These long-term effects remain visible in contemporary Sabah. By 2024, Muslims constitute approximately 69.9% of the state's population, placing Sabah among the highest in Malaysia in terms of Muslim proportion and second only to Selangor in total Muslim population.⁵⁵ This demographic consolidation reflects not merely

⁵¹ Suraya, "History of the Development of Converts in Sabah," 64.

⁵² Hajimin, Ag Omar, and Hajimin, "Tun Mustapha and the Strengthening of Islam in Sabah, 189.

⁵³ Mohd Zulfikaar Azizi Aliakbar and Zaifuddin Md Rasip, "Challenges of Converts in Malaysia and Proposed Solutions," *Jurnal Pengajian Islam* 16, no. 1 (2024): 130.

⁵⁴ Nur Azian Aratin, Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, and Jaffary Awang. "Social Interaction Pattern in Muslim-Christian Relation in Ranau, Sabah." *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 12, no. 5 (2021): 46.

⁵⁵ Rasip, Ramli, and Hamzah, "Mualaf in Sabah," 7.

numerical growth but the durability of religious administration, educational networks, and welfare institutions established during the early post-independence decade.

Conclusion

The transformation of Islam in Sabah during the decade following 1963 was more than a phase of conversion campaigns or numerical expansion. It marked a reconfiguration of religious authority within a newly decolonized political structure. Under Tun Datu Mustapha's leadership, da'wah entered the sphere of governance and institutional planning. Through USIA and related administrative reforms, Islam shifted from dispersed community resilience toward coordinated organizational presence. The constitutional recognition of Islam in 1973 did not initiate this process; it gave formal expression to developments that had already begun reshaping the state's religious architecture.

The importance of this period extends beyond institutional construction, and contemporary Sabah still bears its imprint. The expansion of Islamic administration, educational networks, and welfare institutions created a durable framework within which Islam consolidated its presence while plural coexistence persisted. As demonstrated earlier, the trajectory initiated in the late 1960s continued well beyond Mustapha's tenure, indicating that executive-driven da'wah, once institutionally embedded, may outlast individual leadership.

At the same time, the parallel growth of Christianity during these decades complicates any claim of unilateral religious dominance. Sabah did not become a homogenized religious sphere. It remained multi-religious. Christian institutions retained influence in education and healthcare, even as Islam expanded its administrative and constitutional reach. The resulting configuration was neither confrontation nor assimilation, but a recalibrated balance within a shared civic framework. Its durability remains one of the defining features of Sabah's religious landscape.

Tun Datu Mustapha's legacy therefore requires careful evaluation. His leadership accelerated institutional Islamization and strengthened Muslim political representation, yet it also

exposed structural vulnerabilities, particularly the risks associated with over-centralization and dependence on political patronage. Long-term sustainability depended on cultivating local religious capacity, educational depth, and inclusive governance. These considerations remain pertinent as the orientation of da'wah gradually shifts from demographic consolidation toward institutional quality, socio-economic resilience, and interfaith stability in an increasingly interconnected environment.

Placed within the wider Southeast Asian experience, Sabah represents a distinctive example of executive-centered religious transformation in a plural post-colonial setting. The developments between 1963 and 1973 did not end with constitutional declaration; they set in motion an ongoing negotiation between Islam, governance, and pluralism. Appreciating this historical interplay is essential not only for understanding Sabah's past, but also for assessing the evolving character of religious life in the present era.

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