

Maritime History as a Contextual Learning Resource for Diversity and Nusantara Identity

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Abstract

Maritime history provides a powerful context for understanding interregional connectivity, cultural exchange, the spread of religions, and the formation of Indonesian identity, yet maritime topics are often taught as fragmented factual information. This article interprets the maritime history of the Nusantara as a contextual learning resource for developing students' understanding of diversity and identity. The study uses a descriptive qualitative literature review of maritime historiography and educational scholarship. The analysis focuses on three themes: seafaring as an economic connector, ports as sites of social and cultural encounter, and sea routes as channels for the transmission of religion, language, knowledge, and technology. The review shows that maritime history can help students understand Nusantara identity as a product of historical interaction rather than a fixed inheritance. Maritime materials also support source-based learning through maps, port case studies, trade artifacts, local histories, and inquiry projects. The article argues that maritime history should be positioned as a cross-thematic learning resource in social studies and history. It recommends learning that moves beyond memorizing routes, kingdoms, and commodities toward analyzing relationships among mobility, cultural exchange, power, and the historical formation of plural societies.

Keywords: contextual learning; cultural diversity; learning resources; maritime history; Nusantara identity.

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Introduction

Indonesia was shaped through maritime mobility. Shipping routes connected islands, trading centers, kingdoms, coastal communities, and international networks over long periods. Maritime history therefore offers more than stories of ships and commerce. It reveals how people, commodities, religions, languages, technologies, and ideas moved through the archipelago and contributed to the formation of societies that later became part of Indonesia. Recent scholarship has emphasized that maritime history and culture can be integrated into social studies learning because they provide authentic contexts for discussing connectivity, social change, cultural interaction, and identity (Nur et al., 2023).

In school history, however, maritime material is often fragmented into separate topics: Srivijaya and Majapahit, the spice trade, European expansion, Islamic diffusion, or colonial rivalry. When these topics are taught primarily through names, dates, routes, and kingdoms, students may remember isolated facts without understanding the historical mechanisms linking them. Ports were social spaces in which different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups encountered one another, while seafaring enabled interaction to occur at a scale that would have been difficult through overland routes alone. Understanding these relationships is important for interpreting Indonesian diversity as a historical process rather than as a static national characteristic (Nur et al., 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2023).

Contextual learning offers one way to address this fragmentation. Instead of beginning with a list of maritime facts, teachers can organize learning around historically meaningful questions: Why did certain ports become multicultural centers? How did commerce influence the spread of religions and languages? How did monsoon systems and geography affect political power? Why did some kingdoms seek control over straits and port cities? How did maritime mobility contribute to regional and national identities? Questions of this kind position maritime history as a context for historical reasoning rather than merely as additional content.

Research on maritime education supports this direction. Nurhayati et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of maritime history education in developing a maritime paradigm, while Sulistiyono (2017) highlights the role of history education in preserving national identity through maritime perspectives. Nur et al. (2023) further show that maritime history and culture can enrich social studies by connecting past mobility with contemporary identity. Taken together, these studies suggest that maritime history has pedagogical value when students are encouraged to explain connections among geography, economy, culture, and political power. Earlier work likewise argues for the relevance of maritime history within Indonesian history education, including inland contexts (Ahmad, 2017; Wasino, 2017).

Recent history-education scholarship clarifies why the pedagogical problem cannot be solved simply by adding more maritime content. Historical thinking requires students to work with evidence, accounts, interpretations, causation, continuity and change, and competing perspectives rather than receiving a finished narrative. Reviews of the field show that historical thinking and historical consciousness have become central strands of history-education research because they shift attention from factual coverage to the intellectual practices through which learners make sense of the past (Gómez-Carrasco et al., 2022; Campillo-Ferrer et al., 2023). Classroom and design studies similarly indicate that disciplinary reasoning must be deliberately scaffolded through tasks, sources, dialogue, and conceptual progression (Wilke et al., 2023; Bussell, 2024; Smets, 2024). For maritime history, this means that ships, ports, commodities, and kingdoms are educationally valuable not merely because they represent national heritage, but because they can be organized into problems that require students to infer relationships from evidence.

This disciplinary perspective also changes how identity is approached. Historical interpretation is never reducible to a single celebratory account; learners need to understand how accounts are constructed from evidence and why different interpretations can coexist (Chapman, 2024). Dialogic history teaching can make such reasoning visible by asking students to justify claims, compare viewpoints, and revise explanations in response to evidence (Chang et al., 2023). Critical approaches also caution against treating inherited national narratives as neutral or universal, especially in culturally plural settings (Wallace, 2024). Maritime history is therefore especially productive when identity is framed as a historical question: how did mobility, trade, conflict, migration, religion, and local adaptation create forms of belonging across an archipelagic space?

The educational importance of maritime history also lies in its capacity to complicate simplistic narratives of identity. Indonesia's cultural diversity was not formed only through isolated local development. Port cities, trade networks, migration, religious movements, and inter-island mobility created long-term patterns of encounter. Akhmar et al. (2024), for example, discuss the maritime culture of Bugis-Makassar communities and its transformations, while studies of traditional seafaring and maritime networks show how coastal societies maintained mobility and exchange across political boundaries. These histories make it possible to teach identity as a process of interaction, adaptation, negotiation, and continuity.

This article analyzes the potential of Nusantara maritime history as a contextual learning resource for diversity and identity. It asks two questions. First, which elements of maritime history are most productive for learning? Second, how can those elements be transformed into learning experiences that help students connect trade, mobility, culture, religion, and identity formation? The article's contribution is a pedagogical interpretation that links maritime historiography with the needs of social studies and history education. It does not claim to have tested a particular instructional model; rather, it develops a conceptual basis for source-based and inquiry-oriented maritime learning.

Method

This article uses a structured narrative literature review. Sources were identified through targeted searches of journal and publisher repositories and through backward citation chaining from relevant maritime-history and history-education publications. Search strings combined terms such as “maritime history education,” “maritime culture social studies,” “Nusantara maritime history,” “historical thinking,” “historical interpretation,” “history education inquiry,” and “port history learning.” The review prioritized publications available from 2009 through June 2025, with particular attention to peer-reviewed work published since 2021. Older scholarship was retained when it provided a foundational maritime-historical argument that remained directly relevant to the review question.

Eligibility was determined by relevance to at least one of two domains: (a) historical scholarship explaining maritime networks, ports, trade, mobility, or cultural interaction in the Nusantara and Southeast Asia; or (b) educational scholarship explaining how historical content can support source use, interpretation, causation, perspective, dialogue, and historical reasoning. Items were excluded when bibliographic information could not be verified, when the source was primarily celebratory or popular rather than scholarly, when the educational relevance was only incidental, or when the publication appeared after the review cut-off. The final analytical corpus comprised 20 publications used in the article's synthesis. Analysis proceeded through thematic mapping of economic connectivity, ports as spaces of encounter, cultural and religious transmission, identity formation, and disciplinary-historical reasoning.

The synthesis was conducted in two stages. First, claims from maritime historiography were mapped to relationships that students could investigate, including network formation, spatial constraint, cause and consequence, exchange, adaptation, and continuity and change. Second, these relationships were cross-read against history-education scholarship on evidence, interpretation, substantive concepts, dialogue, and inquiry design (González-González et al., 2022; Wilke et al., 2023; Chapman, 2024; Smets, 2024). A deliberate evidentiary boundary was maintained: popular or celebratory narratives were not treated as historical evidence unless they could be connected to credible scholarship, and proposed classroom activities are presented as design propositions rather than measured learning effects.

Because the study is conceptual, it does not measure learning outcomes. Recommendations concerning maps, inquiry, projects, or local-history activities should be treated as design possibilities that require classroom testing. The contribution of the review lies in clarifying the educational logic of maritime history: it identifies what kinds of relationships students can analyze and how historical sources can be used to move from factual content toward historical reasoning.

Results and Discussion

Seafaring and the Development of Interregional Trade

A reinterpretation of maritime history shows that its educational value becomes strongest when the sea is understood as a space of relationships. Shipping connected producers, markets, ports, political centers, and communities. This connectivity allows students to trace cause and effect: seafaring facilitated trade; trade encouraged the growth of ports; ports intensified cultural encounter; and these networks affected political power and identity. Such chains of relationships provide opportunities to teach historical causation and continuity rather than isolated chronology.

From the classical period onward, maritime transport was a major driver of interregional trade in the Nusantara and Southeast Asia. Sea routes connected regions separated by difficult terrain and made it possible to move high-value commodities across islands and international markets. Southeast Asia occupied an important position between Indian and Chinese trading worlds, and port settlements developed as centers where local and foreign commodities were exchanged (Man et al., 2022; Wade, 2009). Maritime kingdoms such as Srivijaya benefited from their ability to manage strategic routes and port networks, while later commercial centers expanded by linking local production with wider trading systems.

The role of ports demonstrates why maritime history can support systems thinking. A port was not simply a place where ships stopped. It depended on hinterland production, river systems, political protection, taxation, storage, labor, information, and relationships with merchants. Students who analyze a port can therefore connect geography with economics and politics. For example, the discovery of Chinese ceramics and other traded materials in the Musi River area provides evidence of long-distance commercial interaction associated with Palembang (Sholeh et al., 2025). Such material evidence can be used to ask how historians reconstruct trade networks and what artifacts can reveal about relationships that written sources may not fully describe.

During the so-called Age of Commerce, local maritime networks continued to move goods and people even as European powers expanded their influence. Research on the Malay maritime world emphasizes the persistence of regional connections (K anumoyoso, 2018), while studies of Buton and other eastern ports show the importance of local shipping in connecting Maluku, Sulawesi, and wider island markets. Students can use these examples to avoid a Europe-centered narrative in which maritime history begins only with colonial expansion. European intervention changed existing networks, but it did not create maritime connectivity from nothing.

This perspective also helps explain political competition. Control over ports, straits, and shipping routes could increase revenue and strategic influence. When students examine why rulers invested in harbor facilities, maritime protection, alliances, or trade regulation, they can see that political authority and commerce were closely connected. Maritime history therefore provides a concrete setting for discussing how economic resources shape political decisions.

Seafaring as a Channel of Cultural Exchange

Shipping routes moved more than commodities. Sailors, merchants, scholars, migrants, and religious teachers carried languages, technologies, artistic forms, beliefs, and social practices. Ports became environments in which cultural interaction was routine rather than exceptional. The entry and spread of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic traditions, for example, cannot be separated from networks of mobility and exchange. Historical studies of Islamization emphasize that maritime connections contributed to the circulation of scholars, religious ideas, and commercial relationships even though conversion processes varied greatly across local contexts. Recent historical work on Malay seafaring likewise illustrates how technological knowledge and Islamic networks intersected with maritime mobility (Niswah et al., 2025).

This topic is pedagogically valuable because it allows students to move beyond a simplistic narrative in which culture “arrives” from one external source and is then passively accepted. Maritime exchange often produced adaptation. Local communities selected, reinterpreted, and combined cultural elements according to existing political structures and social needs. Students can compare how similar religious or cultural influences developed differently in Aceh, Java, Maluku, Sulawesi, or other regions. Such comparison supports an understanding of cultural diversity as a result of historical interaction.

Language provides another example. Trade requires communication, and maritime networks created spaces in which lingua francas and multilingual practices could develop. Artistic styles, ceramics, food traditions, and technological knowledge likewise moved through ports. The presence of imported objects in archaeological contexts can therefore be used not only to illustrate trade but also to discuss consumption, status, cultural preference, and local adaptation.

A contextual lesson may ask students to choose one port and trace several forms of movement associated with it: commodities, people, religions, language, and technology. Instead of memorizing a list of foreign influences, students construct a network explanation. They identify which groups interacted, what evidence supports the interpretation, and how local society changed without losing its agency. This approach supports historical thinking because it requires relationships among multiple forms of evidence.

Why Maritime History Matters as a Context for Learning

The central pedagogical strength of maritime history is that it naturally connects multiple historical dimensions. Geography matters because winds, straits, rivers, and coastlines shape routes. Economics matters because commodities and markets create incentives for mobility. Politics matters because rulers seek to regulate ports and strategic passages. Culture matters because mobility generates encounters. Identity matters because communities interpret and remember these encounters over time.

These connections make maritime history suitable for contextual learning. Contextual learning does not simply mean using a local example to make a lesson more interesting. It means organizing knowledge around relationships that students can investigate. A map of the spice routes, for instance, can become the beginning of an inquiry: Why could commodities from relatively small islands connect the Nusantara with distant markets? What environmental and technological conditions made the trade possible? Who benefited from controlling the routes? What social changes occurred in the port communities?

Maritime history also supports scale shifting. Students can begin with a local river, fishing community, or port and then trace its links to regional and global networks. This is especially useful in an archipelagic country where many students live near maritime or riverine environments. Local history becomes an entry point into broader historical structures rather than an isolated topic. Such an approach is consistent with calls to strengthen maritime historical awareness through education (Nur et al., 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2023; Sulistiyono, 2017).

Ports as Social Laboratories for Understanding Diversity

Ports offer particularly rich cases for teaching diversity because they concentrate mobility. Merchants, port workers, religious communities, political agents, and migrants interacted within relatively limited spaces. Port societies could develop forms of cosmopolitanism, but they could also experience hierarchy, segregation, competition, and conflict. Teaching ports only as commercial centers therefore misses their social complexity.

Students can analyze a port as a social laboratory by asking who lived there, what occupations existed, which languages were used, how religious communities were organized, and how authority was negotiated. Historical maps, travelers' accounts, artifacts, architecture, and local oral histories can provide multiple perspectives. This can support source comparison and encourage students to recognize that historical diversity was produced through both cooperation and tension.

An inclusive identity education can emerge from this approach. Rather than presenting Indonesian identity as culturally uniform, maritime history demonstrates that plural societies were formed through long processes of interaction. Local communities and newcomers both participated in these histories. This perspective allows students to recognize diversity as a constitutive feature of the archipelago rather than a later problem added to an originally homogeneous society.

From Historical Sources to Inquiry Activities

Maritime history becomes more educationally meaningful when students work with evidence. Teachers do not need to provide full archival collections. Carefully selected maps, images of ceramics, short travel-account excerpts, port photographs, shipping records, or simplified archaeological findings can be enough to support inquiry. The key is to connect each source to a question.

A map of Srivijaya, Malacca, Makassar, or the spice routes can be combined with information about monsoon winds, commodity locations, and centers of political power. Students can then evaluate why some ports developed more rapidly, why rulers competed over certain straits, and why European expansion targeted already active commercial networks. If teachers connect the activity to a local harbor or river, students can compare different scales of maritime connectivity.

Source-based learning also supports historical literacy. Students learn that historical claims require evidence and that different sources answer different questions. A map can show spatial relationships; an artifact may indicate exchange; a written source can describe perceptions or regulations; and oral history may preserve community memory. The teacher's role is to help students compare these sources rather than treating them as interchangeable. This emphasis is consistent with empirical and design research showing that historical thinking develops when learners repeatedly engage with disciplinary tasks rather than merely encounter historical information (Wilke et al., 2023; Bussell, 2024).

Pedagogical Limits and the Need for Classroom Testing

Historical Thinking as the Pedagogical Mechanism

The link between maritime content and learning can be specified as a sequence of disciplinary moves. Students first encounter a historically meaningful problem, such as why a port became influential or how a religious network expanded across islands. They then examine a small source set—maps, artifacts, short accounts, port records, images, or archaeological summaries—and identify what each source can and cannot establish. Corroboration follows as students compare sources, note agreements and tensions, and distinguish direct evidence from inference. The final task is interpretation: students construct an explanation that connects geography, mobility, political power, economic incentives, and cultural interaction. This sequence reflects the broader history-education emphasis on interpretation and evidence rather than the reproduction of a single narrative (Campillo-Ferrer et al., 2023; Chapman, 2024).

The approach also requires careful management of substantive knowledge. Inquiry is not effective when students lack the background concepts needed to understand ports, monsoons, trade commodities, political authority, or religious networks. Research on substantive historical concepts shows that disciplinary reasoning depends on accessible knowledge structures that reduce unnecessary cognitive overload and allow learners to recognize meaningful relationships (Smets, 2024). A maritime inquiry unit should therefore provide concise background knowledge before asking students to interpret evidence. The pedagogical aim is not discovery without guidance, but a structured movement from orientation to source analysis, interpretation, and argument.

Dialogue can make this reasoning public. Teachers can ask students what evidence supports a claim, which source is more useful for a particular question, why two groups might interpret the same encounter differently, and what additional evidence would change a conclusion. Research on dialogic teaching in history demonstrates that classroom talk can support historical reasoning when questions require justification rather than short recall responses (Chang et al., 2023). This is especially important for diversity and identity because students may enter the classroom with strong inherited narratives. A dialogic approach does not require abandoning identity; it requires students to understand that responsible historical belonging is compatible with evidence, plurality, and revision.

Maritime education also has limitations. Narratives of maritime greatness can easily become celebratory and uncritical. Statements about ancestors as natural seafarers, kingdoms controlling enormous territories, or simple routes of religious diffusion are often repeated in popular culture without sufficient attention to evidence. Teachers should therefore distinguish identity narratives from historical interpretations and encourage students to ask what sources support a claim.

This critical stance is not opposed to identity education. On the contrary, it makes identity more intellectually responsible. Students can appreciate maritime heritage while learning that history is an evidence-based explanation open to revision. Such learning is more valuable than replacing old textbook memorization with new patriotic slogans.

A second limitation is the conceptual nature of this review. It does not demonstrate that maritime inquiry automatically improves source analysis, cultural understanding, or identity awareness. The next step should involve classroom-based research. Researchers could compare conventional instruction with map- and source-based maritime learning, observe how students construct explanations, or evaluate local port-history projects. Such studies would provide evidence regarding learning outcomes and practical constraints.

An Example of Learning Flow and Assessment

A practical unit can begin with a spice-route map and the question of why commodities produced on relatively small islands became connected to world markets. Students then compare the map with sources about ports, traded artifacts, and religious or cultural exchange. In groups, they construct explanations linking location, commodities, mobility, political power, and cultural change. Each group can then connect the larger network to a local example relevant to its region.

Assessment should go beyond factual accuracy. Teachers can evaluate the ability to use evidence, explain causation, compare perspectives, connect local and wider scales, and construct conclusions. A short written argument, annotated map, source portfolio, or group presentation can serve as evidence of learning. The design should be adjusted to grade level and available resources so that inquiry remains manageable.

Relevance to Inclusive Identity Education

Learning identity through maritime history should not aim at producing pride without criticism. A more productive goal is to help students understand Nusantara identity as a historical outcome of connectivity and adaptation. Such a perspective creates space to discuss contributions from local and migrant groups while also acknowledging conflict, inequality, and colonial domination.

When students understand identity as a process, they can see that cultural diversity is not a deviation from Indonesian history but one of its central products. Maritime history makes this particularly visible because ports and routes continuously brought communities into contact. This historical understanding can support a more inclusive sense of belonging grounded in evidence rather than cultural uniformity.

Teachers should also select sources appropriate to students' level. Complex primary sources can be adapted through short excerpts, maps, photographs, or artifact images without removing essential context. The purpose is not to increase the quantity of information but to provide enough evidence for students to answer a meaningful question. The richness of maritime history should deepen reasoning rather than expand memorization.

Source Criticism and the Use of Maritime Narratives in the Classroom

A contextual use of maritime history requires students to distinguish historical evidence from celebratory national narratives. Accounts of Srivijaya, Majapahit, spice routes, Islamization, and port cities can easily become simplified stories of past glory if teachers rely only on textbook summaries. Historical learning becomes stronger when students compare maps, travel accounts, port records, material remains, and later historical interpretations. Such comparison allows them to ask how historians know that a particular port was connected to a wider network, why different sources describe the same encounter differently, and which actors are visible or absent in the evidence. This approach also helps prevent maritime identity from being taught as a fixed cultural essence.

The pedagogical value of source criticism is especially important for topics involving cultural exchange. Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, Chinese, Arab, European, and local influences did not enter the archipelago through a single process. Trade, migration, political alliances, conflict, intermarriage, religious teaching, and technological transfer operated differently across regions and periods. Students can therefore be invited to identify mechanisms rather than memorizing a list of external influences. A teacher might ask groups to reconstruct how one commodity, language form, religious practice, or artistic object moved through a maritime network and then compare the pathways they identify.

Connecting Maritime History to Students' Social Worlds

Contextual learning becomes meaningful when historical interpretation can be linked to present-day social realities without collapsing the difference between past and present. Many students live in communities connected to ports, fisheries, migration, inter-island trade, or coastal culture. Even students far from the coast encounter maritime connections through food distribution, imported goods, national logistics, tourism, and popular representations of Indonesia as an archipelagic state. These connections provide entry points for historical inquiry.

For example, students can map the origin of everyday commodities and compare contemporary routes with historical trading networks. They can interview family or community members about migration between islands, examine place names associated with ports and traders, or document local foods that show long histories of exchange. Such activities do not replace formal historical sources, but they can generate questions that lead students back to evidence. The important pedagogical sequence is from experience to inquiry, and then from inquiry to historically supported interpretation.

Implications for Teacher Planning and Assessment

Using maritime history contextually also requires alignment between learning objectives, activities, and assessment. If the objective is to develop historical reasoning, assessment should not focus only on factual recall. Students can be evaluated on their ability to interpret sources, identify continuity and change, explain cause and

consequence, and construct an argument about cultural interaction. Short source-based essays, annotated maps, comparative timelines, or group presentations can provide evidence of these capacities.

Teachers also need to manage scope carefully. Maritime history covers long periods and wide geographical areas, so an attempt to include every kingdom, port, and trading route can overwhelm learners. A case-based strategy is more practical: one port, one commodity network, or one episode of cultural contact can be studied deeply and then connected to a wider pattern. This keeps the material appropriate for classroom time while still demonstrating that Indonesian history was shaped by movement across the sea.

Conclusion

Nusantara maritime history can be developed as a contextual learning resource because it contains concrete relationships among mobility, trade, cultural exchange, religious diffusion, political power, and identity formation. Its pedagogical value is strongest when the material is not presented as a set of routes, figures, and kingdoms to memorize, but as evidence for inquiry into how interaction shaped plural societies. Maps, historical sources, cultural artifacts, port case studies, and local maritime histories can provide a basis for such learning.

The review extends the meaning of maritime history from substantive content to a pedagogical context for developing historical reasoning and diversity literacy. It suggests that students can use maritime material to analyze causation, continuity and change, networks, cultural encounters, and the relationship between local and global processes. This approach also supports a more inclusive understanding of Nusantara identity as historically formed through connection rather than inherited as a fixed and homogeneous essence.

Further research should develop teaching modules and test their effects on conceptual understanding, source-analysis skills, and maritime identity awareness. Classroom studies are necessary because the recommendations in this article remain conceptual. With empirical testing, maritime history can be developed more systematically as a learning resource that connects evidence-based historical inquiry with the realities of an archipelagic and culturally diverse society.

Declarations

Author contribution

Author 1: developed the main research idea and objectives, designed the research methodology, conducted data collection and investigation, performed the data analysis, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. Author 2: contributed to the development and implementation of the research methodology, supported the data collection and investigation process, and reviewed and revised the manuscript to improve its academic quality, clarity, and structure. Author 3: provided input into the research concept and direction, supervised and guided the overall research process, reviewed and improved the manuscript, and contributed to obtaining financial support or research funding

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article.

Use of generative AI

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